

A romantic close-up photograph of a young man and woman. The man is on the left, leaning towards the woman on the right. They are both looking at each other, and the woman's mouth is slightly open as if about to kiss. The lighting is soft and warm, creating an intimate atmosphere. The background is dark and out of focus.

Maren Smith

*My Lady
Robin Hood*

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by Maren Smith

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MY LADY

ROBIN HOOD

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CHAPTER ONE

"Step lively, girls, step lively!" Agatha Wainwright called to her two charges, and reluctantly, Penelope and Anstice climbed down from the carriage that had brought them to the Southwark Cathedral. It was an old building, one that stood as a solid sentry of dignity in the squaller of Montague Close in one of London's poorer districts. The old gothic architecture was crumbling in every sense of the word. The ancient spires were near to complete collapse and loose bricks and bits of stone gargoyles littered the streets at their feet. Gazing up at the rundown building, the two young blonde women wore the same grim look of disbelief. Then they turned that look upon one another.

"Quickly now," their Aunt called out. "We haven't got all day, you know."

Gathering the skirts of her sun-yellow gown in hand and swallowing her reservations, Penelope nudged her younger sister and they both followed their Aunt across the uneven cobbles of the road and up the cathedral's equally uneven front steps. Waiting for them at the top, looking for all the world like a human version of a perpetually nervous lapdog, was their Aunt's favorite reformist, a little man with big brown eyes, who went by the name of Bartholomew Hucks.

"Welcome, welcome!" he gushed, clutching his hands before him almost as though he were praying. "Lady Wainwright, I am so glad you came!"

Penelope and her younger sister exchanged glances again, but their Aunt seemed not to notice. A burly woman, broad of shoulder and a little thick around the middle, she marched fearlessly up the steps to meet him. "Of course I came," she announced, brisk and no nonsense. "And we are ready for our tour."

"Right!" Hucks said, and jumped to lead them back down the steps. "Right this way."

The Southwark Cathedral was, as it turned out, the best looking building on Montague Close. The street was a slum and a lesson in the differences between the privileged and the needy; one that Penelope would not soon forget. The very air stank. Fetid streams of water stagnated along both sides of the filthy street, the access of the sewer being blocked by dead fish and rodents and human waste.

Anstice actually covered her nose, and if Penelope weren't just a little less proud of her manners, she'd have followed suit. Aunt Agatha was significantly more hardened.

"The buildings are all falling apart," she noted. "The conditions are dreadful. How many people live here?"

"At last count we had just under fifteen hundred families," Hucks admitted. "All of them crammed into twenty-one hundred rooms with only twenty-five hundred beds among them. There is no fresh water. There are nine companies who deliver to the area, but they only turn on their services for a few hours three times a week—and only for a tidy profit."

"Deplorable," Aunt Agatha said.

"Yes," Hucks agreed. "That is our first course of business. To erect a new water pump, one that can be accessed by all

the residents for far less than these disreputable companies provide. Sadly, such reforms are not without expense."

"How much?"

The little man looked even more sheepish. "A lot."

"A lot isn't a number, young man," their Aunt said briskly.

"Two hundred and sixty pounds—b-but that covers all the drilling and masonry and the installing of a new sewer to help with the run off...."

"I'll see what I can do," Aunt Agatha said, clasping her hands over her abdomen. "Now continue the tour, if you please."

As Hucks led her aunt and sister down the street, Penelope lingered behind. Her horrified eyes followed the cracked and crumbling foundation of one tenement building to another equally dirty and broken-windowed one. Beneath the tattered hem of an equally dirty curtain, she saw a small gathering of grubby-faced children, peering down at her through the fluttering cloth. Each was indistinguishable from the next, unsmiling, uncurious. They simply stared back at her with silent resignation.

"Penelope!" her Aunt called sharply, and she jumped. "Come along!"

Glancing back at the children over one shoulder, she hurried to rejoin the tour.

Factories lined the distant end of the crooked street, but as Hucks explained, most of the inhabitants of Montague Close never set foot inside them. "Women and children work straight from their homes. The pay for sewing a dozen shirts is, on average, about four shillings-sixpence. There are no

school rooms. Children work alongside their mothers, or they employ themselves in such activities as hawking and far less legal pastimes. Anything to put a little bread on the table for their families."

As they rounded a corner, the street ahead was overflowed with water and—Penelope wanted to believe—mud, but the smell that assailed her nose belied that for the wishful thinking it was.

Anstice squelched a sound at the back of her throat, whipped out her handkerchief and covered her mouth and nose the instant the stench hit her.

"Buck up, girl, and behave yourself!" their Aunt barked, but Anstice was too busy holding her breath to pay attention.

Penelope stared in stupefied disbelief as an elderly man hobbled out of one of the houses, wading ankle-deep into the muck and water as he slogged his way down the street. She swallowed convulsively.

Her head spinning with the horror of what she was seeing, she followed Hucks as he led an apologetic procession across the road and through a different alleyway. He introduced them to a family of nine, a widowed woman who lived in a one-room tenement with her eight children, the youngest two of which were still in nappies. The furniture there consisted of a single bed and a table, at which the widow sat weaving fair-quality ribbons into expensive hats with deft and dirty fingers. Her older children were gathered around her, pinning the ribbons in place with surprisingly nimbleness.

"Oh, Auntie," Anstice whispered on the verge of tears.

Sick to her stomach, Penelope was too shocked to say anything at all. She would never buy another hat for as long as she lived.

"Keep a stiff upper lip," their Aunt said. The queen of stiff upper lips herself, even she had a glimmer of moisture in her eyes.

"I know how this must look," Hucks apologized yet again, as the tour concluded and they returned to the front steps of the Southwark Cathedral. "But I assure you, it's not for the lack of trying. The need for funds is desperate. Even more so now that Marston has transferred his monthly contributions to another organization."

"How can any place be more in need of his money than this?" Anstice cried, ignoring the look of warning Aunt Agatha gave her.

"Exactly the point I've been trying to make," the older woman said, and opened her reticule. She wrote out a bank draft and handed it to Hucks.

Penelope didn't know how much her Aunt donated to the obsequiously grateful reformist, but it could easily have been a thousand pounds and still not have been enough. It was that tidbit of knowledge that would sit in the pit of her stomach, hard and indigestible, for hours to come.

As they all turned to go, something made Penelope look back. Watching her from around the corner of one building was a young red-headed boy of perhaps only four or five. His blue eyes were overlarge in his freckle-strewn face and the lack of expression was telling enough in its own right. It was a sight Penelope was certain she'd never forget.

She had to do something to help.

"That was awful," sobbed Anstice, as they all journeyed home in the back of the Wainwright carriage.

"I'm sorry you had to see that, my dears," their aunt said gruffly. "But perhaps you'll believe me now when I say, regardless of how unbearable you believe your own plights to be, there are those in this world who have it far, far worse!"

Turning her head to the window, Penelope stayed lost in her own thoughts, keeping her own counsel the entire way home. Later that night, she did little more than poke at her supper, saying nothing although Aunt Agatha and Anstice indulged in more than enough conversation to cover her lack of social contribution.

Oddly enough, the only one who made any comment on her lackluster silence was her father, Ansel. Seated at the far end of the table, dressed in the same clothes than he'd been wearing for nearly a week now, his brown eyes peered down the length of the supper table to where his eldest daughter sat poking at her food. Surrounded as they were by the thick lenses of the magnifying glasses he wore, his eyes appeared to be at least six times their normal size, his chin was unshaven and his dinner plate was surrounded by the rocks that had become the focus of his life after their mother had died. "You are awfully quiet this evening, Penelope, my girl."

Penelope glanced up, quickly masking her emotions behind a wane smile. "I'm sorry, Papa. I am only thinking."

"About what, hey?"

"Leave off the girl, Ansel!" Aunt Agatha snapped. "What do you think she's thinking about? The Season, of course: What she's going to wear, how she's going to act, and who to set her sights on to make the best possible match. That's what girls her age do this time of year! And if you want to show an interest in something besides those blasted fossils, how about coming up with the blunt to pay their ways instead of leeching contentedly off the fortune my dearly departed husband left to me! Humpff! Some father you turned out to be!"

Both Anstice and Penelope dropped their eyes to their plates, while their father only blinked at Agatha with his overlarge owlsh eyes.

"Right," he said, and dropped his attention once more to his plate. After a moment, he picked up one of the rocks, took a bite of his supper and, as he chewed, turned the piece over and over in his hands.

The silence grew oppressive and the dining hall became quickly unbearable.

"Please excuse me," Penelope said, pushing back her chair and standing up.

"Where are you going?" her aunt said. "You have hardly touched your food."

"I'm just a little tired," she said. "I think I'll lie down."

"Tired?" Agatha echoed incredulously. "Why, it's barely ten o'clock! The night has only just begun. Tsk!" She shook her head. "How can you be fagging out now? And before the Season even starts, too. Good heavens, girls were much tougher when I was your age. Rest, ha! You can rest when you're married or dead!"

Penelope dropped a kiss upon the top of her father's shiny bald spot, winning a quick smile and a squeeze of his wrinkled old hand upon hers. She caught Anstice's eyes once more, and then left the dining room for the bedchambers her Aunt had given her when first she and her impoverished family had come to live here over a year ago.

A few minutes later, as she was brushing her long blonde hair for bed, she heard a soft knock at the door. Without waiting for an answering hail, Anstice poked her head into the room. "Penelope? Are you all right?"

Penelope smiled wanly. "Just thinking."

"Would you like to think with an extra head?" Anstice stepped into the room and held up a tray bearing twin cups of chocolate and cookies. "I brought refreshments."

Penelope smiled. "By all means, come inside then."

As they had done ever since they were little, the sisters helped each other out of their dresses and into their nightgowns, brushed and braided one another's hair, and climbed up into Penelope's bed to enjoy one last cup of bitter sweet chocolate, propped up on a mountain of soft pillows and nestled down together side-by-side beneath the fat goose-down comforter.

"That was an awful thing we saw today," Anstice said, broaching the subject that had yet to leave Penelope's mind all day.

"The truly horrible part is how it doesn't have to be that way," Penelope replied, turning her head to look out the window. "If only we could help them."

"If wishes were pennies," Anstice said sagely, "we could not only fill up all of their little cups, but we could do something to help ourselves instead of depending upon Aunt Agatha's charity. Unfortunately, unless you plan to become a modern day Robin Hood, we can hardly do a thing for ourselves much less for them. As sad a situation as it may be, ours is even sadder. We cannot even afford our own Season. If it weren't for Aunt Agatha, we'd not be having one at all. As it is, I think we shall both be extremely lucky to find anyone willing to overlook our impoverished states and marry us solely because we are ourselves."

Penelope said nothing although her bright blue gaze had ceased to focus on the window. She turned and looked at her sister instead, wide-eyed and unblinking.

"What?" Anstice said.

"Repeat what you just said."

"Maybe somebody will like us for ourselves, overlook our poor finances and marry us anyway. It is a possibility, you know," Anstice said. "Anne Ashford says she knows a friend who has a second cousin, once removed, whose best friend's stepsister was in our very situation, and she married a wonderfully nice man who dotes on her every day."

"No," Penelope said, with a slight shake of her head. "I mean, the other part. The Robin Hood part."

Her sister blinked twice. "Unless you plan to become a modern day Robin Hood?"

Penelope broke into a wide grin. "Anstice darling, you're a genius!" She turned to set her chocolate on the bedside table,

scooting back against the pillows to sit upright. "An absolute genius!"

Anstice blinked again, her expression growing warily sober. "Penelope, what are you thinking in that devious head of yours?"

"We'll rob from the rich and give to the poor of Montague Close!"

Anstice put her cup of chocolate down as well, but not before she nearly spilled it in her lap out of shock. "What?! How you lost your mind entirely?!"

"Just think about it, it's the perfect plan! The Season's about to start. We'll have access to all the finest houses."

"Our friends' houses! People we have known all of our lives! That our parents knew all of their lives! That our children will know ... Oh, what am I thinking? We won't have any children! The minute we're caught, we'll be ostracized. No one will want to see us, much less marry us! Not for all the money in the world—as if we could get it!"

"Don't be silly," Penelope said with a disregarding wave of her hand. "That won't happen because we won't get caught. You see, it's the perfect plan, really."

"We'll be hanged!" Gasping in horror, Anstice cupped her throat with both hands. "Strung up like common criminals on Tyburn."

"Now you're being melodramatic."

"I won't do it," Anstice said. "I want no part of this. I absolutely refuse to be a common thief!"

"That's quite all right," Penelope said, settling back among her pillows with a small and cunning smile. She picked up her

hot chocolate again and cradled the warm cup between her hands. "I, myself, plan to be a very uncommon one."

* * * *

Like every other party thrown before this, Lady Spencer's ball was an unrivaled success. The wine was flowing, the guests were laughing, the musicians were unparalleled and the fact that Lord Farrington himself would be putting in a very rare appearance sometime tonight meant that the only members of the Ton who weren't crushed together in her ballroom were either too sick to move or already peacefully in their graves.

Perfect, thought Penelope, as she walked along the edge of the dance floor, the trailing hems of her blue and silver skirts barely brushing those of the dancers still twirling to the lively steps of the quadrille. Leading her from the floor, his hand under her elbow as much for support as it was to offer direction, was Rupert Reeve.

A peacock with clothes and yet a dear friend, Rupert was shaking his head. "My dear, Miss Blayne, if only you had told me you were feeling so poorly." He found her an empty chair and ushered her to it, hastening off to fetch her some punch while she sank weakly onto the cushioned seat.

She fanned her flushed face. "I'll be fine," she assured him. "Truly I will."

"Gracious! I would have been just as content to sit and talk with you, rather than risk your collapsing at my feet."

"And here I thought it every man's dream to find a lady so prostrated," Penelope teased.

"Not my dreams," Rupert declared. "As clumsy as my feet are, she should be very lucky if I didn't trod upon her head!"

Penelope buried her smile in her cup of lemonade, and then closed her eyes with a barely stifled groan and leaned her head against the back of her chair. She touched two fingers to her temple.

Dropping to one knee and warmly patting her hand, Rupert said, "These sickly spells are so unlike you! Have you seen a doctor?"

"I'm all right," Penelope assured, her voice too weak to be soothing. "I am only a little weary."

"I should fetch your aunt," the young man stated and stood up, turning to scan the throng in search of Lady Wainwright's burly silhouette.

"No, no," Penelope said quickly. "I wouldn't want to bother her."

"What bother would it be, considering how sick you are? Blast, I don't see her. I don't see your sister, either."

Penelope reached up to take his hand, recapturing the young man's attention. "Perhaps if you just sit with me a while," she suggested with a weak smile, "my energy might rally, and I'll be able to finish the dance."

Rupert blinked at her, or more specifically, at her hand in his, and she watched as his aunt-finding convictions wavered. "Perhaps..." he again lowered himself to one knee beside her. "Perhaps they might." Then he shook his finger at her. "But if you are not on the mends within fifteen minutes, my girl, I will see you home myself."

"I am sure in fifteen minutes I'll be more than fine," Penelope said, closing her eyes again. "If only I could lie down...." her voice began to taper off. "I just need to rest."

With her eyes closed, she couldn't see Rupert's worried frown, but she knew it was there, tugging down the corners of his mouth and creasing a furrow into his young brow. But before he could open his mouth, from beyond them, they heard, "What on earth are you two about?"

Rupert leapt to his feet, dropping Penelope's hand in his haste to face Lady Spencer, who frowned at them sternly.

"Young man, that was by far too bold and too familiar!" the matron reproved.

"I-I—" he stammered.

But Lady Spencer turned from him and focused her hawk's eyes on Penelope. "And just what is the matter with you, girl?"

"A slight headache," the wearied young woman sighed, rubbing her temples. "Mostly, though, I feel just a little bit dizzy."

Although far from convinced by Penelope's performance, a flicker of concern crossed the noble lady's regal face. "Where is your aunt? I should call your carriage."

"Oh please, don't!" Penelope exclaimed, rising enough to catch Lady Spencer's hand. "Both my sister and my aunt are having such a wonderful time, and I know they would never forgive me if they had to leave now. Lord Wentworth has my sister on the dance floor at this very moment, and poor dear Anstice's heart will be torn to pieces if they are parted now."

"Young lady," Lady Spencer said sternly, "I am not about to have you collapsing on the floor and causing a scene."

"Perhaps if she could lie down?" Rupert asked, echoing Penelope's earlier suggestion hopefully, and Lady Spencer's mouth thinned.

"Very well," she said, after only a brief hesitation. "Come along, before someone blames my crab cakes for laying you up like this."

Rupert helped Penelope to her feet and then swept into a gallant bow to kiss the back of her fingers. "Perhaps," he said, smiling up at her, "when you are feeling better you might save for me a waltz?"

"I would love nothing better," Penelope told him, and then allowed herself to be led away while Lady Spencer tsked and shook her head over the antics of the young.

"I am so sorry to be such a bother," Penelope said, as she followed the matron from the ballroom.

"Don't be silly," Lady Spencer said shortly. "Such is hardly a bother for a proper hostess."

And Lady Spencer was nothing if not a proper hostess.

She led Penelope down a long hall lit by many candles, their footfalls alternately echoing on the black and grey marble tiles and muffled on the Persian rugs that spaced the length of the floor. A curved mahogany staircase took them up to a second hall that ultimately took them to Lady Spencer's own sitting room.

The strains of the music and laughter below were bare whispers now as Lady Spencer opened the door and preceded Penelope into a room that was overwhelmingly decorated in

blinding shades of yellow. From the papered walls swimming in yellow jonquils to the downy coverlet upon the bed with its sunny yellow duster, if Penelope hadn't a true headache before, the sheer brightness of the room was fast on its way to giving her one now.

Knowing some reaction would be expected of her, Penelope said, "What a ... magnificent room! How very.... yellow..."

"Isn't it cheerful?" Lady Spencer beamed as she took Penelope to a daybed that would have rivaled the sun. "I find it very hard for one to be melancholy in a room as bright as this one. Now tell me," she bent to fluff two pillows and braced them back to back before directing Penelope to recline. "Does your head hurt you here?" She touched her temples. "Or back here?" She trailed her fingers to the back of her head.

Penelope sank among the pillows, leaning back her head as she touched the back of her hand to her forehead. "To front. Oh, it's only a slight pounding. I must have over-exerted myself."

"The Season has only just begun," clucked Lady Spencer. "How can you ever hope to catch a husband if you wilt yourself out now?" She got up and went to her dressing table, hunting among the drawers until she found a small vial. She brought it back to the day bed and placed it into Penelope's hand, closing her fingers around the cool glass. "Don't be afraid to take a little nip of this, should you need to. But only a sip, child. There is a lot of hop in this little vial."

Shaking her head, Penelope took Lady Spencer's hand in one of hers. "Dear lady, you are the very persona of kindness. But I feel so very guilty for keeping you from your guests. Especially when I know you are expecting someone of such import as Lord Farrington himself."

Visibly starting, Lady Spencer shot to her feet. She pressed her hands to her cheeks. "The Duke's son! Goodness gracious, I quite forgot!" She looked at Penelope, torn. "I do hope that you'll be recovered enough to join us soon," she finally said, making up her mind and backing hastily from the daybed.

"I'm certain I will be," Penelope murmured, closing her eyes.

"Rest is the very best thing for you," Lady Spencer said. "I'll send my abigail to check on you as soon as I can. But, my dear, if you're not recovered within the next half an hour, there shall be no help for it. I'll be forced to inform your aunt!"

"Oh thank you," Penelope sighed, draping her arm across her eyes. "Thank you."

She lay as if napping until she heard the door softly close. Silently, she began to count. Upon reaching the magical number of ten, she cautiously peeked out from beneath her arm and looked to the door. She was alone.

"That was remarkably easy!" Penelope rolled from the bed. Catching her blue and silver skirts in both hands, she darted on tiptoes to the door and pressed her ear to the white-washed wood. From the outer hall she heard not a sound, though she remained listening intently for several long, heart-

pounding minutes. The silence made her bold, and she reached down to depress the handle, cracking the door open by the barest inch.

Outside, the hall was empty.

Penelope immediately shut the door again. The slight nagging whisper of her conscience gave way beneath a wave of sheer excitement as she turned around and once more surveyed the yellow room. She could hardly believe her luck. She was actually inside Lady Spencer's room and it had been easy! Much, much easier than Penelope's first few horribly fumbled attempts at thievery had proved to be. And.... and good heavens, but this room was almost yellow enough to make her want to shield her eyes!

Shaking her head over the lack of some people's decorating sense, Penelope started towards the dressing table and, more specifically, for the large, carved wooden box that rested upon it: Lady Spencer's jewelry box.

Unfastening the clasp, Penelope raised the lid and smiled when she saw the array of jewels that winked up at her as they caught the light of the room. "Hello, my lovelies," she greeted them softly. "Which of you would like to be donated to a worthy cause? More importantly, which of you is of so little consequence that you won't be missed?"

She reached inside, picking through the crush of rings and bracelets, discarding diamonds, emeralds, rubies and garnets, until her fingers finally settled upon a thin gold necklace with a small diamond pendent. It was a simple enough design really, nothing like the lavish arrays that Lady Spencer was fond of wearing these days. Lady Spencer would probably

never miss so insignificant a jewel as this. And that made it the perfect choice. Simple and perfect.

Simplicity, however, did not detract from the value of the diamonds and just thinking of all the mouths these twinkling gems would feed was enough to silence the last of Penelope's misgivings and make her smile once more. Why, even with a jewel so small as this, it might even be enough to begin repairs on that crumbling cathedral.

"I thank you, Lady Spencer," she said as she closed the jewelry box and slipped the pendent necklace into the bodice of her dress. "I'm sure the poor will thank you, too."

The gems felt cool against her skin as the necklace slithered down between her breasts to pool in a coil of golden links just beneath them, where a bunch of muslin kept the precious jewels from falling any further.

She paused for a moment to study herself in the mirror. She patted the golden curls of her hair back into place, touched her cheeks, as if to assure herself that her guilt wasn't showing upon her face, and then slipped quietly from the room to rejoined the party downstairs.

Rupert looked up from the cup of punch he was sharing with the young Miss Anne Ashford when she once more walked into the ballroom. He beamed as she came to stand before him. "Well I say, that rest was just the thing, wasn't it? It put the sparkle right back in your lovely blue eyes; you look as fresh as a morning rose!"

"I feel a thousand times better," Penelope told him, holding up her hand. "In fact, I do believe I am more than ready for that dance now."

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She smiled, the gems in her bodice having already warmed to the touch of her skin that she hardly felt them as he led her onto the dance floor, and they fell into step with the waltz already playing.

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CHAPTER TWO

"Well?" asked Angel Townshend as her brother returned to her side with a cup of lemonade in each hand. Niles detested lemonade, but he had brought one for himself anyway—although his was laced with something significantly stronger than sugar.

In fact, he thought, as he turned to face the room of middle-aged mamas and their fresh-faced daughters, all decked out in a rainbow array of pastel gowns, he could quite happily have skipped the lemonade altogether and brought the brandy bottle with him. Here he was, once again dangling himself for a bride and already he was finding the experience every bit as awful as the first time had been.

"If you're asking if Lord Farrington has arrived yet, no," Niles said drily. "He hasn't."

"I'm not, and you know it," Angel replied, a note of impatience creeping into her tone. "Who here has struck your fancy, Niles?"

"I don't believe I have a fancy left to strike," Niles said dryly and sipped at his drink.

Angel shut her fan with a snap and used it to whack his hand, a mildly stinging admonishment for which she received a hard look in return.

"You're not too big to take across the knee," Niles pointed out. Rubbing his hand, he gave her a pointed look. "I've done it before."

"I'm married now," she said, although her eyes locked on him warily. "I've got a husband who would take exception to your delivering such brutality upon my person."

"Exception?" Niles laughed. "He's much more like to thank me and beg for instructions."

Angel gave him another look and then turned her gaze back to the dance floor and pointed with her fan. "That girl over there is Anne Ashford. Sweet girl with an ample fortune. What about her?"

"She has an ample waist as well," Niles returned. "Next."

"Katherine Blankenship," Angel suggested. "There in the white dress, sipping punch."

"Good heavens," Niles said. "If she gets any thinner, you'll be able to see right through her. That can't be healthy. Next."

"Miss Grey..."

"No, I danced with her already once this evening. She has no teeth. Come now, Angel," Niles turned to give her another pointed look. "I've shopped with you, for heaven's sake; I know you've better taste than this!"

"For someone without a fancy, you're being awfully particular," she groused.

Niles stepped away from the wall to peruse the dance floor for himself. "That one," he said, clasping his hands behind his back to keep from pointing and tipping his head where he wanted his sister to look. "The dark haired girl with the pretty brown eyes and rosebud mouth."

"How very poetic of you!" his sister teased.

"That spanking is inching closing and closer, my dear."

"You would not dare exert that kind of barbarism here," Angel sniffed.

"Would you care to place a wager on that?"

"You wouldn't," she insisted, with only slightly less conviction than before. "Such an act would only cause you great personal embarrassment."

"Not true. I would also lay considerable injury to your backside. And I dare say, my pride would recover much faster than your fanny."

Angel pouted, snapping her fan open to cover the slight frown that tugged at her mouth as she glared at him and stepped sideways away from him. "That is Lady Halford's stepdaughter, Stephanie."

"A lady of considerable fortune," Niles said, nodding.

"Every Season must have at least one," his sister agreed. "It does help keep things interesting for the rest of us not in the market for marriage. Personally, I've always enjoyed watching the young bucks scrambling to out-best their rivals, all the while attempt to engage the lady of his choice in a battle of wits to win her favors."

"And who is that man there," Niles drawled, nodding his head again, "scrambling for her affections as we speak?"

Angel turned to follow the direction of his gaze. "Ah, that would be the Honorable—and I do use the term in its loosest possible definition—Mr. Stawel."

"I don't believe I know him."

"Count yourself fortunate. He's a fortune hunter. He inherited his estate from an older brother roughly a year ago. Since then, he has run it virtually to ground, gambling away

everything he can get his hands on, usually on horses and cards. The whisper is that his creditors have called in their notes. If he cannot land an heiress this Season, his estate will likely go on the market before Fall."

Niles grunted noncommittally. "Miss Halford hardly seems to mind his impoverished state."

Angel smiled faintly. "Niles, Miss Halford is an addle-patted git." Niles gave a bark of incredulous laughter as she added, "Hopefully the girl's mama has more sense and will keep her dim-witted daughter out of Stawel's clutches until the threat of him has passed."

"I doubt it," Niles said, chuckling. "I have met her mama and can honestly say that she has no more sense than...." Niles paused, his gaze caught by the flash of golden curls and a sunny smile out on the dance floor. "I say, who is that?"

"Who?"

"That one." Niles almost forgot himself enough to point, but managed to catch himself in time. Instead, he said, "The one in the blue and silver gown. The one dancing with the peacock in that dreadful yellow suit."

"That peacock is Rupert Reeves. His father happens to hold a seat in Parliament. And the girl, I believe, is Penelope Blayne."

"Tell me about her," Niles commanded, watching with hawk-like intensity as the girl danced passed him, smiling and laughing at her companion, her eyes riveted to the peacock as though he were the most fascinating of men.

"I don't have anything to tell," Angel said. "I hardly know the girl or her impoverished family."

Niles gave her a look. "You know everything about everyone in England. That's why I brought you with me tonight. Now talk."

"Grump," she snipped. "You really are a beast when you want to be."

"You are snipping yourself closer and closer to a hot and throbbing bottom."

"And I have already told you I don't know anything about the girl's family. We hardly circulate in the same social circles." Angel snapped her fan open, using the soft fluttering motion to mask her mild irritation. "She and her sister seem like nice enough girls, I suppose. I've yet to see them when they are not friendly and polite, their manners always perfectly polished. But while I admit the Blayne chit would cut the most flattering visage, dangling upon your arm and giving all her smiles to you, I'm not sure I'd want her sprout budding upon our family tree."

Niles looked at her. "And why would that be?"

"I don't know," Angel airily replied. "I haven't yet decided if she's odd or just unlucky."

"Odd?"

"It's all circumspect, you understand, but she does seem to be ill an awful lot here all of a sudden."

"Lady Abernathy was ill for fourteen months straight, and you called her a poor dear."

"The girl is clumsy, too. Somehow she has also managed to tear her dress twice this Season. Twice," she emphasized,

in case he'd missed it the first time. "And the Season's only just begun. Now what does that tell you?"

"That she chooses clumsy dancing partners," Niles replied.

"Mr. Reeves I could well believe that of, but not Mr. Stawel." Angel shook her head. "The man may be a fortune hunter, but on the dance floor he glides about as if on cat's feet. I've never known him to make anything even remotely similar to a clumsy move."

"If she's as impoverished as you say, why would a fortune hunter bother to dance with her in the first place?"

"I believe he cut the jig short when he found out."

"And left her standing on the dance floor with empty arms?" Niles said, narrowing his eyes. "The cad! Horse-whipping would be too good for him!" His gaze left Stawel and landed again upon Penelope Blayne. "What else do you know about her?"

Angel looked surprised. "What I've told you isn't enough?"

"To blemish the girl with a label of 'odd'? I should say not. Arrange an introduction, Angel my dear. I want to meet her."

"I think you should set your heels for someone more conventional, like ... like that girl there, by the garden doors. Cynthia Wells. I've met her twice and can safely say that she's perfectly ordinary in every possible way."

"I don't want Cynthia," Niles told her firmly. "I want Penelope. Think about Lucy. My marriage to her was perfectly ordinary. It was also perfectly miserable for seven of the longest years of my life. I've never been so happy to have a death in the family."

Angel gasped in reproach.

"I mean it, Angel," he said. "If misery is what convention brings, I believe I'd like to see how the other side fares." He turned back to the dance floor, for the barest instant catching Penelope's eye. She smiled at him, but then her attention was recaptured by her partner and she turned away laughing.

"Oh dear," Angel suddenly said.

"What?"

"Our hiding place has been discovered. Here come the matchmaking mamas."

Niles raised his head, following the direction of his sister's gaze and then stifled a groan. "Her waist is even wider than the Ashford chit."

"I believe that's Mrs. Merriweather. Money enough, but she's hunting a title for her daughter."

Niles put on a polite smile and leaned in close to his sister. "I mean it. You make the arrangements and when I have done the pretty with Miss Merriweather and her mama, I expect an introduction to Miss Blayne."

"Lord Granville!" Mrs. Merriweather, a plump woman in a purple dress, hat and even a bright purple peacock plume that bobbed off the side of her head as she spoke. "What an honor to finally meet you! Although I confess we're all rather surprised to hear that you'd given up the country life and moved back to town."

"Madame." Niles bent himself over her hand. His eyes, however, glided past the gem-covered fingertips that he was duty bound to kiss and locked straight upon Penelope. She was laughing gayly as she allowed herself to be swung around the dance floor, the lively steps of a country frolic making her

pink in the cheeks, breathless and breathtaking all at the same time.

"May I introduce my daughter, Janine," Mrs. Merriweather said, pushing her daughter ahead of her and almost into Niles in her exuberance to make the introduction.

The young Janine blushed, and Niles pasted a polite smile upon his face and bowed low over her hand as well. "Pleased to make your acquaintance, my dear. However, I must admit, all rumors regarding my return to society are only half truths. I intend to remain in London only long enough to find myself a better half, and then I shall hasten right back into the country where I belong."

"Nothing wrong with that," Mrs Merriweather said, beaming a huge smile. "Nothing better than country air for the raising of strong, healthy and happy children."

Her daughter turned a brighter shade of red; Niles just cleared his throat. "Absolutely." Casting one last wistful look in Penelope's direction, he nevertheless did as was expected of him. "Miss Merriweather, you wouldn't happen to have this dance free, would you?"

Janine opened her mouth, but didn't have the chance to answer before her mother answered, "She certainly does!" and shoved both her and Niles towards the dance floor.

Niles took Janine through the lively motions of the country steps but very little conversation passed between them. He couldn't tell if the girl was painfully shy or simply uninterested in the matchmaking process, but with every step and turn he took, Niles began to feel a surge of excitement bubbling inside him. Not because of his current partner, oh heaven's

no! But because each step brought the dance closer to an end and meant that his chance to meet Penelope Blayne drew nearer. But by the time the dance was over and he'd escorted Janine back to her waiting mama, there was a score of mothers and daughters excitedly gathered around Angel, anxiously waiting to make his introduction.

"You are very popular," Janine said, the only snippet of conversation that she'd offered all night.

"Yes," he said, giving Angel a hard look, which she promptly ignored. "So it would seem."

And so the evening progressed, like the dull ache of a bad tooth, seeming to last forever and with Penelope dancing perpetually in the arms of another man. Still, Niles did his duty. He met with each girl in turn, danced with two of the wallflowers and three of the pretty ones. But none of them sparked as much of his interest as the pretty blonde woman who danced with everyone, it seemed, but him. At times, she even danced close enough to where he was that he could have reached right out and skimmed the softness of her cheek with his fingertips.

Smiling at her current partner, she had glanced at him only briefly, but the loveliness of her radiant face had him catching his breath. He completely lost his train of thought mid sentence while conversing with ... damn, he'd already forgotten the name of the flirtatious brunette in his arms. Though she batted her eyes at him continuously, he barely noticed. His gaze stayed on Penelope from the instant the dance steps turned him in her direction until the half-turned step that propelled him around to give Angel meaningful,

pleading looks for mercy. All of which she pretended not to see.

Niles's palm began to itch unbearably and he gave her a pointed glare that said as much. This time, she interpreted his expression correctly.

When Niles walked his current introduction back to her waiting mama, Angel made her way to his side and wrapped her arms around one of his.

"Dear ladies," Angel said, interrupting yet another introduction to yet another hopeful daughter in search of a husband. "I'm sure you'll forgive me, but there is someone I'm just dying to introduce to my brother. Do pardon us."

Angel smiled as she pulled Niles away, and two disgruntled mamas with pouting daughters by their sides watched helplessly as their wealthy and titled prey slipped into the crowd and away.

"I wish you had done that two hours ago," Niles grumbled. "My feet feel as though I'm walking on nubs!" Though she turned her head away, he thought he glimpsed a smile. "You minx! You fed me to them on purpose!"

"I hardly think 'fed' is the appropriate—"

"You'd best watch yourself, my girl, or I really will have you sitting on pillows before the night is done!"

"All right, all right, I'll behave myself," Angel said, taking one sly peek at his face and abruptly giving in when she found the expression there did not bode well for her bottom. "There goes your precious Miss Blayne. Walk a little faster on those nubs of yours, my darling brother, and we'll corner her at the punch table."

'Corner her' was a laughable term. Penelope was more than aware of his approach. She glanced up when they were still halfway across the room and could easily have made her escape if that's what she wanted. But instead, he felt her eyes gliding curiously over him, sparkling like the bluest of sapphires, while her mouth turned up in a knowing smile that caused his belly to warm in response. Then, lowering her gaze to the cup of punch she held in both hands, she simply waited for him to make his way to her.

And not only did she wait for him, but when that erstwhile peacock, Reeves, tried to approach her for yet another dance, Penelope quite artfully maneuvered herself so that, in pursuing her, the young man ran right smack into Lady Ashford and her blushing daughter, Anne. He was instantly waylaid.

"Clever girl," Angel murmured.

Niles couldn't help but agree, the welcome warmth in his belly growing with every step that brought him closer to Penelope. And then she turned her head to meet his gaze and her sparkling blue eyes locked with his. She smiled solely for him for the first time all evening, and Niles was suddenly and completely lost.

"Miss Blayne," Angel beamed, separating from Niles's side and reaching out to clasp Penelope's shoulders. "How wonderful to see you again!"

"Lady Townshend." Penelope leaned in to air-buss her cheek with a kiss. "How have you been? And where is that charming husband of yours? I haven't seen Lord Townshend

all evening. I was beginning to think perhaps you might have given this crush a miss."

"Not on your life," Angel said. "My husband prefers to spend his nights in his library. How fortunate for me that my brother has just come out of his self-imposed country seclusion. He has graciously decided, for a short while at least, to reacquaint himself with polite society. I have taken it upon myself to ferry him about the city, show him all the best attractions and introduce him to all the finest people." She spread her hands. "Which brings us to you. Miss Penelope Blayne, if I may so bold, I'd like for you to meet my brother, Niles Granville, the Earl of Aylesford."

"I am terribly flattered," Penelope said, dropping into a curtsy.

"And here I thought it was I who should be flattered to make the acquaintance of so lovely and popular a lady." Niles bowed in response, reaching out to catch her hand as she began to rise. He raised it to his lips and, glancing into her eyes, turned her palm upward to press a much more intimate kiss into the pulse of her inner wrist. "Do you know it's taken nearly two hours of almost constant manipulation just to catch you alone?"

"My lord, you are too kind!"

"And bold," his sister murmured, barely loud enough for him to hear.

"Kind," he said, straightening, although he didn't release her hand. "But woefully lacking of a dance partner. My dear Miss Blayne, I believe they have just began another waltz. You wouldn't happen to be shy a partner for it, would you?"

The warmth of her smile went right through him. "You know, I think I just might."

Angel disappeared in the direction of Lady Spencer and her gossiping cronies as Niles led Penelope out onto the floor. She fit into his embrace as though made for him and pulling her closer brought a wave of lilac perfume in accompaniment. It sent his senses to spinning before they even took a step.

"For one who has been secluded in the country for so long," she said, as they moved into the first graceful turns of the waltz, "you are a wonderful dancer."

"Thank you," he said. "Although, I have had all winter to practice counting without moving my lips."

She laughed. "I could lead, if that would make you more comfortable."

Now it was Niles's turn to laugh, albeit dryly. "The room certainly has its share of sassy minxes tonight."

"Is that such a bad thing?" she teased.

"Not in and of itself," Niles said. "So long as it doesn't get too far out of hand."

"And if it does?"

Her skirts swept around his legs and the smell of lilacs dazzled him almost as much as her smile. "Well then," he heard himself say, "a well-placed swat generally does wonders to bring the errant miss back to mannerly behavior again."

The lovely blonde woman in his arms looked first startled and then incredulous. "A what?"

"A well-placed swat," he repeated. "A smack to the nether regions. The loving act of bringing a sting and flush to the

place where a woman sits in an effort to curb her natural tendencies to misbehave."

"Sir, are you making references to spanking my situpon?"

"I certainly am. Upturned and across my knee, preferably divulged of petticoats and knickers, and with delicate cheeks all a-quiver in dreaded anticipation of a heated reform."

"You truly have been in the country too long. Allow me to educate you, my lord. In polite society, a gentleman generally does not make references to a girl's bottom, smacked or otherwise."

"He does if he intends to be the one smacking it."

"You must be joking!" she laughed.

Niles only smiled and turned her into another spin, and her hesitant smile faded a little.

"You—you're not joking?"

He leaned in close to her, but not too close, painstakingly aware of the many eyes in the room, most of which were attached to gossipy mouths. "Being a potential candidate for Parliament, I never joke about reforms."

"But I haven't done anything," she said, although for the first time since the start of the dance, her eyes slid away from his.

"Which is why you are not now lying, kicking and wailing, across my knee, with your skirts up about your shoulders."

She frowned, and the last of the sparkle faded from her eyes to be replaced by a glimmer of rising temper. "You sound as if you are thoroughly enamored with the idea of beating me."

"I am referring to a spanking, my dear Penny, not a beating. There is a difference. No honorable man worth his salt would lower himself to beat a woman. What I am talking about are the not-so-gentle pats of persuasion that rarely fail, when delivered correctly, to inspire even the most radical of behavior modifications, especially with mischievous minxes. Surely your mother gave you a dose or two growing up."

"Penelope," she said. "Not Penny. And my mother died when I was five."

"Your father, then."

At that, Penelope laughed. "I am much too current for my father to have more than a passing interest in anything I do."

Niles arched a brow, questioningly.

"He collects fossils," Penelope explained with a wry smile. "Well, collects is such a mild word for it, really. Rather he lives, eats, sleeps and breathes fossils. Unless you are a stone with a prehistoric formation inscribed upon it, he has very little interest in you."

"Is your father Arthur Blayne?" Niles asked.

"One and the same, I'm afraid."

"Ah," Niles nodded diplomatically. "That would place you firmly among the Northumberland Blaynes then."

Again she smiled, although it didn't quite reach her eyes. "That it would. We are the penniless Blaynes, my sister and I both. So you needn't say what I know you are about to. I thank you for the dance and the, uh.... stimulating conversation, just the same."

Although the waltz was only halfway completed, Penelope started to step back from him, but Niles only drew her closer.

"I am not hunting an heiress, Penny my dear. I have money enough for us both, so a lack of blunt is not about to have me casting you aside so impolitely or so soon."

"Penelope." Although she fell back into step with graceful ease, the look on her face bordered on puzzled. "Money and enough. Now there are two words that one does not often hear spoken in the same sentence. At least not without a 'of which there is never' situated somewhere in between."

"Perhaps once you get to know me, you'll find that I can be a trifle different from most of the young men you are accustomed to."

"Oh, but I knew that from the moment you mentioned, with all the grace and verse of a natural-born poet, smacking my bottom to cure me of my impudent tendencies."

He smiled. "And yet you haven't run screaming from the floor."

She lifted her head, her blue eyes once more sparkling as bright as any star in the heavens. "Sir, when *you* get to know *me* better, you'll find I don't run screaming from anything."

Chuckling, Niles bowed his head in acknowledgment. "That is exactly the trait that will make you, my sweet Penny, a prime candidate for that wonderful art of bottom smacking."

"Penelope," she corrected yet again, although this time she didn't lose her smile. "And, were I you, I should be very careful not to mention your disciplinary penchants too often, lest I be led to think you are a man of mostly hot wind and bluster and very little action with which to back your threats."

"My darling Miss Penny," he said, his arms tightening around her to bring her closer still, "I am very much a man of

action, as you will no doubt discover in your very own sweet time."

"Penelope, and I doubt that very much." Penelope braced her hands against his chest and reasserted the proper distance between them. "For a man of your stature, an Earl no less, to smack the bottom of any woman other than his wife, would be the absolute height of impropriety. Scandal and gossip would follow your name everywhere. Mamas would lock up their daughters at the very sight of you."

"Or drag them out to me with birch rods in tow." He heaved a melodramatic sigh. "Sadly enough, however, I suppose you are right about the former. That leaves me with very little choice but to take you for my wife so that I may exercise my disciplinary penchants without fear of social censure."

As the last notes of the waltz strained into silence, Penelope stepped back out of his arms, her smile fixed firmly in place. "Good sir, I can honestly say, with great depths of feeling and from the bottom of my heart, not for all the tea in the world would I ever consent to being your wife. I am much too fond of sitting, you see, and it's taken me a lifetime of work to hone my minxishness into impudent perfection. I should truly hate to have my skills set back." She dropped into a flawless curtsy, bowing her head before once more raising her laughing blue eyes to his. "Have a wonderful time in London, my lord."

And then she walked away.

It was the last dance that she allowed herself to be cornered into taking from him that night, but as Niles and

Angel were loaded into their carriage for the long ride home again, his sister asked, "So how did you find the lovely Miss Blayne? Was she to your liking?"

"Very much so."

"And what about her liking to you?"

"Well, that all depends. Does the world have a lot of tea, do you think?"

Angel tipped back her head and began to laugh. "She put you down!"

"Not at all," Niles corrected smoothly, turning his head to look out the window as the carriage began to roll. "She merely set for me a challenge." Arms folded across his chest, he idly stroked one finger across his shaven chin, the passing street lamps alternately illuminating his face and casting it into shadows. "When have you ever known me to ignore a good challenge?"

"Oh dear," Angel said between chuckles. "That poor girl hasn't a chance."

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CHAPTER THREE

Up until a week before, Penelope had never even heard of Braybourne Alley. It wasn't the sort of place that got much mention in polite society. Of a certainty, no well-respecting lady would have been caught anywhere within a four block radius of the pawn shops and bars located along that rundown street. Sometimes also known as Fishmonger's Alley, Braybourne was the place to go for those stricken by ill fortune and in sudden need of some extra blunt. Penelope discovered its existence the day her aunt came home from tea with a friend, tsking and shaking her head.

"That wastrel husband of Anne's just won't be satisfied until they're both in the poor house," she said. "Now he's hawking her jewelry at Epstein's."

"Epstein's?" Anstice echoed.

Aunt Agatha patted her hand and said, "Braybourne Alley, dear. A nasty little place you need know nothing about."

But it was a place that Penelope needed to know about. With Lady Spencer's most insignificant necklace burning a hole in her reticule, it was the last piece of the Robin Hood puzzle that she'd lacked and blessed Aunt Agatha had just fit it neatly into place. After all, robbing from the rich only got a girl so far if she didn't have a place afterwards to sell her ill-gotten gains.

Knowing Anstice would worry herself sick if she knew, Penelope took care to rise very early the next morning. It was ten o'clock, the cocks had barely done their crowing and her

eyes were burning from lack of sleep. But Penelope was stubborn and firmly resolved to her task, and it was imperative that she get back before her aunt awoke around noon and began asking questions. Anstice was as loyal a sister as any could hope for, but she also had a dreadful tendency to crack under hard questioning and babble.

Penelope took every precaution. She removed the family crest from her Aunt's coach and swore the driver to absolute secrecy, which would all but guarantee that every servant in the house would know by mid-day, but with any luck the information would go no further than that.

Penelope also took care to wear a non-descript dress—the most non-descript one that she owned—a black mourning gown from the year her mother had died, and a black hooded cape with a veil to hide her face. Anyone would be hard pressed to recognize her, she knew, but she still spent several minutes in front of the mirror, turning first one way and then the other, carefully scrutinizing her reflection for the slightest thing that might give her identity away.

When she was finally satisfied that there was nothing, Penelope paused to take three deep, calming breaths. She pressed her hands flat over her stomach as if she could still her nervousness by sheer force of will. She was more anxious now than when she'd lifted Lady Spencer's necklace in the first place!

Nervous? Ha! At the moment, she was downright scared!

For the duration of the ride to Braybourne Alley, Penelope sat as if on pins and needles. Her hands clutched her reticule and though she knew it was impossible, she could have sworn

she could feel the tiny diamond inside burning through the beaded cloth and into the palms of her hands.

The real Robin Hood had probably suffered a twinge or two of conscience when he first began his nefarious career, too, she thought to herself. All this skulking would just take some getting used to.

Is this really something you want to get used to? her reluctant brain whispered.

It's for a good cause, her heart stubbornly argued.

"Think of the Montague Close," she said softly and stiffened her spine to do what she knew she must.

And still, when the conveyance pulled to a stop three blocks down from Epstein's, Penelope hesitated yet again. Up ahead the street was blocked as to prevent the Wainwright carriage from getting any closer. She would have to walk the rest of the way.

As meek as a mouse, she crept down from the seat to stand on the rundown street, staring with wide, veil-concealed eyes at the ramshackle buildings on crumbling foundations, at the unfortunate ladies walking the other side of the street, and at the drunk man passed out—oh heavens, or maybe even dead!—along the bottom of one unwashed stoop. Her fear intensified and almost undid her completely. With every ounce of strength and willpower that she possessed, she forced herself to remain on the cobbled road instead of bolting back into the safety of her Aunt's carriage right then and there and ordering the driver to take her home again. Now! Immediately! Without ever looking back!

You're made of tougher stuff than this, Penelope told herself, and clenched her hands so tightly around her reticule that her fingernails bit into her palms.

"Stay here," she whispered to the driver. "I'll be right back."

"Yes, miss," the driver said, looking anxiously about them.

The finery of her coach had attracted attention from the night-walking women and, further on down the street, two men had come out of one building to take a look at them. Suddenly, across the street, the doors to a tavern, the Thistle and Crown, swung open and two burly men tossed a third one out into the street. The man fell face-down on the cobbles and lay there, groaning piteously. His face had been sorely pummeled and he struggled feebly to rise to his feet.

"Oh my goodness," Penelope squeaked.

Turning to go back inside, the two burly men paused to stare back at her. Finally, one nudged the other and they both disappeared back into the pub.

Hands and knees both shaking now, Penelope ducked her head and started walking. She tried not to look back, but quickly made her way to Epstein's shop.

By the time she reached the pawnbroker's, her heart was pounding fitfully in her chest and she could barely catch her breath. She felt as if she'd run a mile full tilt instead of walking just the few, short blocks that separated Epstein's from the carriage she had left behind. She hazarded a glance behind her, only to find more people had appeared on the road, watching after her, their faces grim, emotionless, unreadable. She all but slammed Epstein's door, pressing

both hands against it firmly to keep from being pursued inside should any of them have that intention.

"May I help you?"

Penelope shrieked and nearly jumped straight out of her skin. Whirling around and grabbing her chest, she promptly burst into a peal of nervous laughter as she took in the unassuming little man standing behind her.

His bushy brown eyebrows arched in surprise and he held up both hands as if to soothe her. "I do truly beg your pardon. I didn't mean to startle you."

"Oh no, please." Patting her chest to still her pounding heart, Penelope said, "It was my fault entirely. I—" she turned to look out the dirty window beside the door. "I am a wee bit on the jumpy side today."

"Ah," the little man said, stepping up beside her so he too could peak out into the street. "There are some unsavory sorts in Braybourne. But never fear, my dear. You are perfectly safe in my shop."

"You are Mr. Epstein, then?"

"That I am." The little man snapped about with a smile and executed a near courtly bow. "Solomon Epstein, at your service. Now let me think." His eyes narrowed slightly as he looked her up and down. "What might I have to tickle the fancy of a lady such as yourself? A soft and pretty pair of new kid gloves? Or—no! A sparkling bauble to go about that lovely throat. Something to draw the admiring gaze of that certain young gentleman...?"

He let the sentence to hang, leaning slightly forward as if to encourage her to fill in the gap. But at the same time, his

gaze also shifted, drifting somewhat south of her face and down into the bodice of her black gown.

Her smile fading slightly, Penelope cleared her throat to draw his eyes back up to her face. "Actually, um..." she began to open her reticule, her normally graceful fingers fumbling hopelessly with the clasp. "I've brought something that I need to ... need to see if you would ... be—oh blast, where is it?—uh, interested in ... Oh, there it is ... in buying. See?"

She pulled Lady Spencer's necklace from her purse and thrust it out at to pawn broker, stiff-armed for his inspection. Her hands trembled just a little, which was what Mr. Epstein looked at instead of the diamond pendant.

"You are so young to be having these sorts of troubles," he said with a tsk and shook his head. He brought his hands up, cupping beneath the necklace with one and covering her other until he had her fingers trapped in his grasp. "Come with me into the back, my dear. I am almost certain that I can help you."

Releasing the necklace into his hand and carefully extracting her own, Penelope followed Epstein through a veritable maze of dusty displays. The room was wall to wall with furniture, clothes, store fittings, chests and barrels, gowns and guns and display after display of odd-and-end bits of jewelry. She almost had her shaking under control by the time he ushered her to a small table in the very back.

Taking a seat across from her, he reached back to open the curtain and let in the sunlight. Holding Lady Spencer's necklace up to the golden rays, he said, "A truly lovely piece,

my dear. Real diamonds, not paste. A simply and yet eye-catching design." When he turned his eyes back to hers, the open friendliness with which he had initially greeted her was replaced by a vaguely calculating look. "What, may I ask, would you like for it?"

She couldn't help but inch a little forward on her seat. "How much is it worth?"

By the smile that curved one side of his mouth, she knew she'd asked the wrong thing.

"Unfortunately, that is not anywhere near as important as what I can give you for it. I am willing to go as high as thirty pounds."

Penelope sat there for a moment, for the first time in her life feeling horribly ignorant. She raised her eyebrows. "Is ... is that a lot?"

He shrugged. "It can be. It depends on what you need."

"Food for my children," she said, and soothed her conscience for having uttered such a misleading statement by arguing that it wasn't a complete lie. The children of Montague Close could very well be considered hers once she began to fund them. Certainly they were dependant upon her ... possibly even for their very survival.

Epstein nodded. "I'll tell you what. For you, for this necklace," he lowered it to the table, "I'll give you an extra five pounds more."

Penelope smiled, believing herself to have probably done the best she could under the circumstances, and thanked him. She left his shop shy one necklace, but with a plump reticule that was significantly richer by thirty-five pounds.

However, the instant that she found herself back on the street, her old nervousness returned and intensified. The Alley was no longer mostly empty. In fact, there was quite an audience built up on the stoops of the surrounding buildings.

Clutching her reticule to her chest, she ducked her head and started walking as quickly as she could back to her carriage. Glancing back every few steps, she couldn't help but see the two men who detached themselves from the group on the stoop across the cobbled road in leisurely pursuit.

Her heart skipped a beat. She could run now, but she knew they would easily catch up with her before she reached the relative safety of her Aunt's carriage.

Directly ahead of her a door suddenly swung open and a drunk staggered out onto the street amid the raucous shouts of laughter and loud music and Penelope never thought twice. She jumped to grab the door before it swung closed again and ducked inside another seedy and smoke-filled pub.

Like a strip of fresh bacon sizzling over an open fire, she had just flung herself out of the frying pan and directly into the flames. Penelope stopped just inside the door to stare at the roomful of men, most of which were still sober enough to fix their gazes back at her and keep them there. Not only did her unsavory pursuers from the street follow her inside, but now she was surrounded by a roomful of the same. The only woman in the place—aside from the two barmaids and a street walker—and the second most finely dressed person in the bar, she knew herself to be at a dreadful disadvantage all the way around.

"'Ello, 'ello, luv," one of her pursuers said. Scruffy in appearance, with a chin that didn't look to have been shaved in at least three days, he sauntered towards her. "What 'ave we 'ere, eh?"

"I—" her breath left her with a shaky whoosh. "I'm I-looking for m-my husband."

Oh, what a terrible liar she was becoming!

Scruffy grinned, showing a missing front tooth. "I'll be yer 'usband, luv.." He grabbed his crotch and laughed uproariously along with his companions.

Out of the corner of her eye, she glimpsed movement and shied away just as another man reached up to finger her veil. She tried to catch it, but he pulled the gossamer fabric from her face entirely.

"Gor blimey!" he exclaimed to the others, fingering the material. "I've ne'er felt somethin' so soft! This real silk?"

"Don't touch me!" Penelope tried to sound braver than she felt, but the men only laughed. "I mean it! M-my husband will kill you—all of you—if you touch me!"

"Don't you worry, sweet'ear," Scruffy said, sauntering towards her. "We aren't goin' to 'urt you. We'll just keep yer company 'til 'e gets 'ere."

As they advanced, Penelope quickly spun around, her eyes darting around the darkened pub until they fell upon a well-dressed man at the bar. In the midst of a conversation with the tavern keeper, she could only see him from the back, but he looked tall and very broad at the shoulders. Strong, in other words. Maybe even strong enough to give the men hounding her pause.

"There you are!" she cried, her voice quavering with her fear. She all but threw herself upon him, wrapping her arms around one of his and whispering furtively under her breath, "Please, get me out of here, I beg you!" Penelope looked up into his startled face and suddenly her stomach plummeted all the way to her toes. "Lord Granville!"

"Penny!" Niles exclaimed. "What the devil are you doing in a place like this?"

"Please get me out of here," she whispered again, and he turned to look behind her.

"Oh lord," he said, taking in the sight of the men gathering at their backs.

Brow furrowed, the man who had fingered her veil said, "Is she really yer wife? Yer must be daft lettin' 'er come to a place like this. Were she me missus, I'd 'ave 'er crossed my knee."

His hand closing around her upper arm, Niles smiled, although the mirth of it didn't quite reach his eyes. "In that, my good man, we are of like minds."

Penelope felt her cheeks flush, but at the moment she was too scared to be indignant.

Niles hustled her from the pub and down the street, all but forcing her to run just to keep pace with his long-legged strides. Penelope glanced back over her shoulder to her aunt's carriage, which was being left behind.

"We're going the wrong way," she said and tried to point back behind them. "My carriage is back there."

Niles turned around to look, but instead of taking her back there, he put two fingers to his lips and let out a piercingly

loud whistle. The driver's head came up instantly and Niles waved for him to move out. The man needed no other directions. He snapped his reins and the Wainwright carriage rolled down the street.

"What in the world were you thinking?" Niles snapped, as he once more turned and started walking. "Good lord, woman! Where is your common sense?"

Penelope stumbled on an uneven cobble and nearly fell but for his arm, which looped about her waist and suddenly her feet left the ground entirely. She let out a startled cry and grabbed at him just as his shoulder bumped under her stomach. Suddenly, Penelope found herself turned upside down, helpless to do anything but stare down the length of his broad back, past his legs to the street in surprise. Niles had barely broken stride.

"Oh my goodness," she said, marveling at how strong he was.

Across the street, however, her plight was greeted with whoops of laughter and ribald comments from both the street walkers and the men who frequented them.

Penelope blushed even hotter. "If it's not too much trouble, may I ask you to put me down please? Failing that, may I ask where I'm being taken?"

"Home," Niles bit out.

"But my carriage...." she looked up just as the Wainwright conveyance drew abreast of them. Niles waved it on. "Now wait one minute!" she protested as the driver drove off and abandoned her there.

"Any coachman who would bring you here would likely take you anywhere you asked! So we are going to take my carriage and I shall personally put you back into the hands of your father, with the suggestion that he apply the strap to your bottom for being so blasted reckless with your virtue and your life!"

Penelope's jaw dropped and a spark of temper hit her right between the eyes, which was where her blood was starting to pound for hanging upside down over his shoulder. Planting her hands against his back, she tried to heave herself up. "Now see here—"

His hand suddenly walloped the seat of her skirts and Penelope jumped.

"Don't start with me, my girl," he growled. "In my current frame of mind, I am very willing to finish with you in a way you would definitely not enjoy."

Her jaw dropped even farther and her temper flared instantly to life. "Don't you ever do that again!" she thumped her fist against his broad back. "You have no right to exercise your predilections upon my person! You—ouch!"

His hand walloped her bottom yet again, even harder than before. Then again, and again. Penelope kicked with the force of the fourth swat and then grit her teeth, struggling to hold still so he would quit. Despite her many layers of petticoats, her bottom was definitely beginning to feel the discomfort. By the time the tenth and hardest swat of all landed against her, she was biting her lip to keep from shrieking. Their audience, on the other hand, was still laughing across the street.

"Now," Niles said simply, jostling her upon his shoulder like an overlarge sack of flour. "Is there anything else that you think I've no right to do again?"

Her whole face flamed, but Penelope didn't struggle any further and she didn't say a word.

"Splendid," he said. "Off we go, then."

Folding her arms across her chest, Penelope glared at the street below her and thought black thoughts down upon his head. Somehow she doubted if the real Robin Hood would have been quite so meek in the face of humiliation. Nor would he have simply lain here with a stinging bottom while some hulking Goliath of a Sheriff of Nottingham carted him home to his parent like a recalcitrant child. For a spanking, no less.

Ha! Well, the joke was on him. Folding her arms across her chest, she glared at the passing cobblestones, her cheeks pinkening with impotent rage. Her father had never pulled away from his fossils long enough to discipline either her sister or herself as they were growing up; she seriously doubted if he'd be inclined to start now.

By the time they reached his curricule, her temper had reached a roiling boil. But if the words capable of adequately describing his villainy had been invented yet, then Penelope didn't know them.

Niles couldn't have cared less anyway; he simply tossed her up onto the seat. Penelope sat out of reflex, but when he climbed up beside her, the idea of having to ride next to him the entire way back to her Aunt's became unbearable.

Grabbing up her skirts, she tried to disembark on the other side of the curricule, but Niles was quicker.

"Sit down," he snapped. He didn't wait for her to obey, but caught her arm and dropped her bottom down on the seat next to him.

She winced, feeling a slight twinge of warmth in the place where he'd repeatedly smacked her. "You should be hanged for treating a lady so shabbily!"

"Count yourself lucky that we don't all get what we deserve!" he told her stiffly, as he picked up the reins. "You have no business trafficking in Braybourne Alley and you certainly had no business being in that pub!"

She snapped around on the seat to stare at him, her mouth open. "You were in there! Why is it all right for you and not for me?"

"I'm not so much a gentleman that I won't state the obvious," Niles said tersely. "Because I'm a man."

"That is such a poor excuse that it's no excuse at all! I won't accept it!" Penelope tried to stand up again, but did so just at the exact moment that Niles snapped the horses' reins and the curricule jolted into motion. The jerk toppled her back down on the seat beside him. "Ow!" She put her hand back to cup one tender nether cheek and then gave him a dirty look.

"That, my girl," he growled, "is all the excuse you need and you'll accept whether you want to or not. And besides, if I didn't have business at that blasted tavern, I promise you I wouldn't have been there to save your disobedient hide!"

"Oh no? Then why were you there?"

"My late wife enjoyed gambling a little more than I was aware." His mouth tightened, and he cast her a quick sideways look. "To keep me in that state of blissful ignorance

she took out several loans, which have been coming to light at the most awkward of moments as of late. Not that it's any of your business, but I was there to pay one off."

Penelope tried not to feel mollified, but a trickle of sympathy snuck in past her anger and lodged itself in the pit of her stomach. "Oh ... well ... bully for you." Great. Now she was starting to feel sorry for him. Lifting her chin, she stated, "As it so happens, I had a very good reason for being there myself."

He snorted and she was affronted all over again.

"I did!" Penelope declared, and then she was stuck having to come up with a lie because, unless she wanted to be hanged for thievery, she really couldn't afford to tell him the truth. "I—I wanted to see how the other half lived!"

Niles looked shocked. "The poor?! You risked your life in a desire to experience poverty?"

"No, I meant 'the other half' as in you."

"Me?"

"Men," she stated, giving him a look that clearly implied the poor might have been a more intellectual choice after all. "You get to do all sorts of things that I'm not allowed. It's beastly unfair."

"That is not a good enough excuse to risk either your safety or your virtue," Niles told her.

"I didn't go there to risk my life. Virtue, however, is grossly overrated."

He looked shocked all over again, turning on the curricule seat to stare at her. "It most certainly is not!"

"Oh no? Then why must women forever fight to maintain theirs while men get to go carousing, that age old manly rite of passage that the female of the species must needs be shut out of. Men have enjoyed this pasttime for hundreds of years, perhaps even thousands, and I haven't got to experience it once! So there. That's why I was there. I was—" she rolled her hand and then her eyes, "—carousing."

"That is not," he reiterated through tightly clenched teeth, "acceptable. Not if I have anything to say about it."

As the curricule pulled up in front of her aunt's house, Penelope turned her frown full on him. "You, sir, have nothing whatsoever to say about anything I do."

"I have a declared interest in you," he snapped. "That gives me a good deal to say."

"I do not want you to have an interest," Penelope snapped. "I am a free spirit until the day I wed. If I should decide to wed, that is. I may very well decide to spend the rest of my life carousing instead."

"The hell you say!"

She gave him a long, icy look, then deliberately forced a smile. "We'll see, won't we?" She stepped down out of curricule while his face turned a delightful shade of red and the toothy smile she gave him was almost as good as a facial slap.

"Thank you so very much, my lord, for the ride."

Turning, Penelope started for the house. As soon as she got inside, she had every intention of asking her father just exactly what a night of 'carousing' entailed, but as it turned out, she barely got three steps between herself and the carriage before she heard Niles drop to the ground behind

her. Glancing back over one shoulder, she took one look at his face and froze mid step.

Running, perhaps, would have been smarter.

His shoulders were squared, his mouth was grimly set and his dark eyes were boring into hers with a fervor that made her stomach clench into instant knots. He had removed his coat and was already beginning to unbutton and roll up his shirt sleeves.

"Eep," she said.

Niles's verbiage was slightly more refined. "You and I," he growled as he headed straight for her, "are about to have a discussion. And, my dear, you may count on it's being a thorough one!"

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CHAPTER FOUR

"I suppose you think you're going to exercise that vile predilection of yours upon my person?" Penelope asked him, already backing up a step. Truthfully, though, she needn't have bothered. The ominous look on his dark face was speaking volumes of his intent.

With one sleeve already rolled up past his elbow, Niles switched to the other arm and started towards her.

"That's quite far enough." Penelope stopped backing away when she bumped against the stone banister of the front porch steps. She drew herself upright against it, although her badly quivering body hardly seemed to possess the courage to stand up to a flea, much less the Earl. "I mean it, villain! If you come one step closer, I-I shall scream down the house!"

"By all means, go right ahead." He kept on coming, his boots crunching against the gravel ground.

Her nerve gave way and she ducked behind the bannister, putting the solid stone between them. "My father and Aunt shall call the constable," she threatened.

"Probably."

"You'll be arrested," she persisted, hardly believing that her threats—dire though they were—seemed to be having little impact upon him. "They'll toss you into Newgate for disorderly conduct. Disturbing the peace. Assault upon a lady! Think of the scandal! I-I—" she stammered and backed helplessly up the steps. "I'll yell rape!"

He gave her a knowing look. "Well, at least we both agree you'll be doing a fair amount of yelling."

"How can you be so dense? You can't think to-to—" she couldn't even bring herself to say the word. "You've been free enough with my person as it is! I'm not about to let you do *that* again to me!"

"Let," he emphasized the word as he reached the bannister, "as you are about to find out, has nothing whatever to do with it." Never once breaking eye contact, he hopped over the stone divider. He was now less than six feet away and coming closer still while she was running out of places to retreat. "As you are also about to discover, anytime that I must rescue my intended from certain rape and degradation, a considerable amount of my 'vile predilection' will be exercised to a very uncomfortable degree."

Penelope sputtered, the words 'intended' and 'rescue' both colliding on her tongue even as she bumped into the massive double doors that made up her Aunt's front door. "You exaggerate. Rescue me, indeed; you did no such thing. I'm a big girl, sir, and am fully capable of taking care of myself!"

"Which is why you threw yourself at me in the tavern and begged me to flee you to safety!" Niles scoffed.

She stiffened, her cheeks flushing a dull red. "I didn't ... I.... You..." She spun around, grabbing for the handles and shook both doors with her vain efforts to get them open. Locked! She quickly whirled back around only to find that he was now less than three feet away and there was nowhere else for her to run. "Bloody hell."

His eyes flashed. "Watch your mouth!"

"Bloody! Hell!" she snapped back, drawing herself up to her full five-foot-five inch height to glare balefully almost eye to eye with him. It was, in retrospect, not the wisest thing that she could have done. But then cornered women didn't always do the wisest of things. Catching up her skirts, she tried to bluster past him and run back down the steps, but he caught hold of her arm and put an abrupt unyielding halt to her escape.

Which led to unwise thing number two: she turned with one hand upraised to slap him ... and was very nearly pulled right off her feet, because instead of standing still so they could continue their argument face-to-face, Niles had started walking again. Back down the steps and around the corner of the house. He dragged her straight out to the small garden shed by the bird fountain and the hedge fence that separated her Aunt's house from that of their neighbor's.

"Get out," he told the servant, who knelt just inside the door potting flowers.

The servant looked up in surprise. His eyes darted from Niles to Penelope.

"You can stay, if you want to!" Penelope quickly contradicted, but Niles was much more persuasive.

"I don't recommend it," he growled, and the servant took one look at his face and gathered himself up to leave. He slipped past Penelope without so much as a backwards glance.

"You wanted to see how the other half lives?" Niles said, when they were finally alone. Dragging her to his side, he propped one booted foot up on a three-legged stool and the

next thing Penelope knew she was face down across his thigh with her feet well up off the ground and his heavy arm pinned across the small of her back.

She managed only one squeak before his hand came down, hard and flat, across her upturned buttocks. Her whole body jerked under the impact.

"This," he said over her squeal of indignation, "is how my father would have dealt with such a foolish venture! And you can thank the Powers That Be that there is no gardening cane out here, or I would give you a true and proper thrashing exactly the way I would have received it!"

For something that was not 'true and proper', the fury with which his palm descended again and again made it a very good approximation to Penelope's way of thinking. There were only two times in all of her memory that she could recall having ever before been in this position. Both times it had been across her mother's lap while the butter paddle went to grim work. Nile's hand was every bit as fierce as she remembered that butter paddle having been, even with the many layers of her skirts and petticoats between her belabored flesh and his. The impacts were jolting and the sharp sting sizzled its way through all the cloth and into her skin.

"Young ladies do not run about the city without their abigails," Niles said, his strong arm rising and falling relentless. He spanked her with growing ferocity, and all Penelope could do was clench her hands against his thigh and grit her teeth to keep from crying out. "They do not go to Braybourne Alley, even with an escort! Had anyone else

caught you there, your reputation would be tatters before the sun set this evening. And if I ever hear another coarse word fall from your lips, you'll not only find yourself kicking and wailing across my knee, but you'll do it with a sliver of soap in your mouth! Am I understood?"

Penelope bit her lips, holding back the cries as the heat and pain built to overwhelming intensity

"Am! I! Under-stood!" Niles snapped, and walloped her bottom all the harder with each syllable.

"Yes!" she gasped, throwing back her head with a sharp cry. "Yes!"

Just when she thought she couldn't bear not one stroke more—just when she thought for sure the hurt would overtake her—his hand stayed. Niles abruptly pulled her up off his knee and set her back on her feet.

Grabbing at her smarting backside, Penelope cupped the back of her skirts and struggled with all her might not to rub.

With his foot still propped up on the stool, Niles braced his forearm across his knee. He ground the knuckles of his other into his hip as he asked, "Now, what have you to say for yourself?"

Penelope huffed. Her chest heaved and she glared at him with a look fit for murder. Before she could think, her hand moved of its own accord, flashing out in a second attempt to slap him.

He caught her wrist and, with her fingers just inches from his cheek, glared at her grimly. "How fast would you like to find yourself back over my knee, this time with your skirts above your waist and your knickers around your knees?"

Her face burned as hot as her nether cheeks. Wrenching her arm back again, Penelope whirled around and ran for the house.

* * * *

Penelope burst into Anstice's room, all but slamming the door behind her. Her cheeks were hot with color and she was struggling to control her breathing.

Lounging on the window seat, Anstice took one look at her and sat up, setting aside the book that she'd been reading. "What's happened?"

"That! Beast!" Penelope bit out. "That beast! That absolute.... *beast!* Why if I were a man, I'd punch him right in the nose!" She shook her fist angrily at the empty air.

Anstice blinked twice, her brows furrowing in confusion. "Who?"

"That pompous, overbearing tyrant, Granville!" Penelope said vengefully.

"What happened?"

"I'll tell you what happened! That barbarian dragged me all the way home from Braybourne Alley and then he—he—he spanked me! Spanked me hard! As if I were a school girl in short skirts! Right there in the garden shed. In front of everybody!"

A corner of Anstice's mouth twitched. "He did what?"

"Oh, it was a vile enough experience to suffer through once, don't make me repeat myself!" Penelope began to pace up and down from the window to the door, rubbing the back of her skirts as she walked. "I've never been so—so

humiliated in all my life! There's no help for it but that I'll be forever unable to return to the side garden!" She drew herself up short and glowered at the floor. "All the prettiest flowers were over there, too. I'm very put out."

Anstice turned on the window seat to face her sister, closing her book and laying it on the cushions beside her. "The Earl assembled everyone in the shed to watch?"

"Well ... no. He did send old man Jacobson away before he lit into me like the brute that he is." Penelope tenderly prodded the sorest places with very ginger fingertips. She winced a little, and then got angry all over again. "But I distinctly saw Mr. Whiskers crouching in the corner!"

"I'm sure the cat will be horribly scandalized."

"You are deliberately missing the point! The man beat me!"

Anstice quickly hid her smile behind as serious a frown as she could muster. "I'm sorry. You're right. He's a beast."

"This isn't a laughing matter!" Penelope stalked over to her, turned her back on her sister and yanked her skirts up high enough to show Anstice the extent of the damage done to her. "Look! Just look at what he's done!" She bared an expanse of rosy flesh beneath the volumes of lace and petticoats. "Oh, I don't think I'll be able to sit without bursting into tears, not for a week at the very least!"

Anstice dutifully bent down to look. "I think I can see the print of his palm. Yes, there's his finger and thumb. Good heavens, but he's got an awfully large hand."

"Awfully, is right." Penelope winced as she gently touched the sorest spot with two tender fingertips. "I've been tenderized, Anstice! Oh, that—that blasted—*man!*"

Her sister only smile. "I must admit, I have so been hoping that you would find a someone to distract you from this dangerous Robin Hood folly. I'm glad it is the Earl. And so early in the game, too. Perhaps he can put a stop to all this pilfering before it gets any further out of hand."

Penelope glared down her nose at her sister and promptly dropped her skirts down around her legs. In the most icy tone she could manage, she said, "If this is all the sympathy I am going to find here, I'll apologize for disturbing you and leave you to your book."

"Penelope..." Anstice called cajolingly after her, but Penelope had already stalked out the door and was swinging it shut, somewhat harder than normal, behind her.

* * * *

A week later, the sisters joined the glittering throng at the Ashford House, where the ballroom was even more crowded than Lady Spencer's had been. Taking from the rich had been an easy task and giving to the poor had proved most rewarding, one sorely spanked bottom notwithstanding. With every fiber of her being still awash with the pride and good feelings that delivering the first of her ill-gotten proceeds to the inhabitants of Montague Close had created, Penelope stood in the doorway, overlooking the crowd of friends and acquaintances. A tremor of excitement stole through her, and

it wasn't the prospect of the upcoming dances and flirtations that invoked it, either.

"Promise me you won't do anything illegal or immoral or even just plain wrong," Anstice whispered out of one corner of her mouth. "Not tonight."

"The fight against oppressive poverty can have no reprieves," Penelope softly replied, her eyes falling to the glittering sapphire necklace worn by their hostess, the matronly Lady Ashford, as she moved to greet their Aunt.

"Penelope, please..." Anstice whispered desperately. "Please stop this—"

Penelope took a quick step to one side away from her sister's pleading, grasping hands, and smiled her most charming greeting. "Why, hello Lord Wentworth. And how are you this evening?"

Anstice jumped and whirled, just as the young lord reached her side. He executed a mannerly bow to them both even as he reached for Anstice's hand.

"Ladies," he greeted, but once his attention was fixed upon Anstice it stayed there. "My dear, you outshine every other woman here."

Anstice's fan shot up to cover her blushing cheeks, and though her eyes never quite lost their pleading expression when she shot Penelope an imploring look, she couldn't help but giggle a little. Particularly when he took her hand in his and bent to kiss the back. "Oh my," Anstice whispered, turning so pink in the cheeks that she rivaled the blossom shade of her gown.

"Would it be too much for me to beg of you the first dance?" the young lord asked the object of his affections.

Penelope watched with a smile as her younger sister lost the mastery of her tongue and was forced to nod instead.

Wentworth smiled. "And the last one, may I have that as well?"

Anstice covered her helpless smile with her opened and fluttering fan. "My lord, please. Two dances in one evening.... people will talk."

"Then they will simply have to talk," the young lord said gallantly. "For I intend to beg of you every dance in between as well." He drew Anstice down off the steps. "If I may be permitted, my dear, I would like to introduce you to my mama."

Anstice shot a mixed flustered, tickled and imploring look back to her sister over one shoulder. 'Be good,' she mouthed, trailing behind Lord Wentworth.

'Have fun,' Penelope mouthed back just as her Aunt suddenly appeared at her side. The older woman's hawk eyes followed the young couple's progress across the room.

"I didn't just hear that, did I?" Aunt Agatha said. "Every dance in between?"

"It's young love," Penelope said with a sigh. "And a very good match, especially knowing she'll bring nothing to his house. I'm happy for her. You should be, too."

Agatha snorted. "When there's an offer for marriage on the table, then I'll be happy. Until then it shall be no more than one dance a night." Penelope's aunt sniffed, drawing herself primly upward. "Perhaps two.... if I'm distracted."

"I hear there is to be a course of cards in Lady Ashford's sitting room later tonight," Penelope offered.

Her aunt smacked her forearm lightly with her closed fan. "Don't be impudent, child. Now smile and look ravishingly approachable. I want to see you dancing tonight with someone other than that popinjay Reeves."

Aunt Agatha spied an old crony and pulled Penelope off with her until she should be claimed by her first prospective beau of the evening.

Penelope was just settling herself into a chair and had arranged her skirts neatly about her when a familiar and unwelcomingly tall form cast its long shadow over her.

"Good evening, Miss Blayne," said a deep voice.

A frown pulling at her mouth and a touch of pink anger already rising to stain her cheeks, Penelope looked up at Niles. He looked resplendent in his dark formal coat and impeccably tied cravat. And the way he smiled down at her, reaching out to take her hand and bowing to press a kiss to her knuckles, made it seem as if he'd forgotten that unfortunate morning they had shared only one week earlier.

She had not forgotten, however. Nor had she forgiven him, not so much as one hard-palmed smack! Just the sight of him made her blood boil in her veins, and not in a particularly nice way, either.

"Good evening, my lord brute," she said stiffly. If only she weren't a lady, she so badly wished that she could kick his shin, stomp upon his foot, and walk away!

"Dare I hope that you might have this dance free?" Niles asked.

She pulled her hand from his before having to suffer the touch of his lips and turned her head away. No, she had definitely forgotten nothing. "No, and you may take yourself to the devil even for asking, my lord, if that is your inclination."

Aunt Agatha whacked her arm with her fan. "Penelope!" she hissed.

Niles's mouth twitched upwards and his eyes began to sparkle as if he were choking back laughter. "Such is not my inclination, madame, but I do thank you for keeping my well being so firmly in your mind."

"Actually," Penelope said airily, "your well-being has been the farthest thing from my mind."

"I'm wounded!" he bantered.

"A fatal injury, I hope."

Aunt Agatha whacked her arm again, harder this time. "Penelope!" She gave her niece a warning look and then tried to laugh off the sour remark. "I do so beg your pardon, my lord," she told Niles with a smile, and then glared at Penelope. "My niece seems to be out of sorts tonight."

Folding his arms across his chest, Niles grinned down at the maiden blushing so furiously before him. "Given a moment or two alone, I'm almost certain that I could put her back into sorts relatively quickly."

Penelope glared at him, pretty sure that vaguely scandalous statement could also double as a threat to the very aspect of her anatomy that was currently enjoying the comfort of her chair. Fortunately, Aunt Agatha was still

unaware of what had transpired in her garden shed and, so, missed the reference.

"My lord Granville, really!" Agatha fluttered her fan as she looked about them, making sure no one else had heard. Unfortunately, Lady Ashford was close enough to have, although she was presently engaged in conversation with Lady Wellington and her son. Lowering her voice, the elderly woman gave Niles a very reproachful glare. "I must insist that you keep all conversations with my niece on a respectful level."

"My apologies," Niles said. "I have been in the country too long, I fear. My manners are taking their own time in recovering."

"Nonsense," Penelope chirped with feigned cheerfulness. "You must first have manners before they can be expected to recover from anything."

Agatha snapped her fan closed and whacked Penelope's arm again.

"Ow!" Penelope rubbed the stinging spot. "I'll have a bruise there, if you're not careful."

"What has gotten into you?" her aunt demanded in hushed tones. "How can you speak so poorly to Lord Granville, of all people?"

"He should feel very fortunate that I speak to him at all!"

Niles started to laugh. "Out of sorts is right! But I do believe I know just the thing to raise your spirits." He reached into her lap, taking a firm hold of her hand and pulling her to her feet. "Let's dance."

As if on cue, Lady Ashford's musicians began the lively strains of a waltz. Unless she wanted to cause a scene and send the town gossipers to tongue-wagging, Penelope had little recourse but to follow Niles out onto the floor and position herself right in his embrace. But she didn't have to like it, and she told him as much as he took the lead and spun her into the first turn.

"You are vile," she said.

"You are lovely," he countered back, and pulled her just a little closer than what etiquette dictated was proper.

Penelope tried surreptitiously to push him back, but his arms had a certain unyielding quality to them when he wanted her close. She gave up before the miniature struggle became obvious, and she glared darkly up at him.

"Shall I sweep you by the shadows and steal a kiss from those pouting lips?"

"How eager are you to be bitten?" Penelope said.

"Oh ho! It's like that, is it? Have I fallen so far out of favor? You must admit, you did deserve to have your lovely bottom smacked."

Penelope ducked her head, glancing to those dancing closest to them and promptly lowered her voice, snapping back, "I'll admit no such thing! And I'll thank you kindly to keep any further comments about the attractiveness of my physical aspects to yourself from now on! In fact, don't even keep them to yourself. Just don't think of them at all!"

Niles arched his eyebrows, pretending to consider her request. "I honestly don't think that will be possible."

"Try harder."

"I am already perched on the verge of being thoroughly besotted by your charms as it is."

"Ha!" Penelope barked, unimpressed.

Niles tried again. "Perhaps Lord Wentworth had the right idea. Should I beg you for every dance, ensuring that you remain in my arms throughout the night?"

"I'd sooner drown myself in the punch bowl."

"Mr. Stawel will rescue you, never fear. He's already drunk half his way to the bottom." Niles took her into a reverse turn. "I could insist upon it, you know. The dancing. One of the fringe benefits to being an earl is that you tend to get your way an awful lot."

Catching a warning look from her Aunt, Penelope forced herself to smile for the sake of appearances and, like a boa constrictor about her waist, his arm drew her closer. Her stomach was bare inches from his now, and when he led her into another turn, the tips of her breasts brushed his chest. The unexpected result of that sensation left her nipples tingling in her bodice. Trying to ignore her traitorous bosom and stiffening her spine to keep that accidental touch from happening again, she said, "My lord, you do have a way of making suicide appealing."

"Now, now," Niles said easily, a smile curving his lips as he inclined his head. "Suicide is too dramatic, not to mention a trifle overdone. Isn't that how that fool Brighton tried to end his life—flinging himself off a balcony, all for the failing love of that Emerson chit two Seasons ago?"

"Yes, although he wasn't successful. He only broke his legs."

"True. He lived to love another day. Unfortunately, now that everyone has seen us together, if you should attempt the same, people will wonder if it's not because you're head over heels in love with me. In which case, I shall simply have to post the bans and give you my name."

"Ha!" Penelope laughed again, and turned her head away lest he see through her eyes and come to know just how much of an effect his nearness was beginning to have on her. Already a deliciously warm, molten feeling was sinking down through her belly and somewhat lower still.

"Methinks the lady doth protest too much," Niles breathed into the shell of her ear, sending shivers racing all through her.

Penelope stepped on his foot, hard. As hard as she could and managed to wriggle a few inches of space between them before he recovered his surprise enough to tighten his arm back around her waist. Sadly, escape had come too late to help, and to Penelope's utter dismay she discovered that his touch had already brought every part of her body to life. There wasn't a bit of her that didn't tingle and pulse with anticipation as he pulled her close again.

He gave her a knowing smile. "Well done."

"Thank you," she replied. Oh dear, she almost sounded breathless! She had to get away from him. Now. Immediately. Before he turned her into a complete pudding right there at his feet.

He seemed to know anyway. His lips curved into another slow smile and his arm began that smooth boa constrictor squeeze that drew her nearer. And in the next instant a loud

ripping sound came from the floor at their feet. For the first time since the start of this dance it was Penelope's turn to smile. "Oops," she purred.

Niles froze midstep and looked down, stunned to see the torn flounce pulled partially away from the hem of her dress with his booted foot firmly pinning it to the ground.

"Well, well," Penelope said silkily. "Are your shoes perhaps a tad overlarge for your feet?"

A slow flush stole up Nile's face. "I can't believe I just did that."

"Mm," she said. "You know what they say about grace and manners going hand in hand." His face flushed even brighter and there was no longer even the slightest trace of a smile anywhere around the lines of his handsome mouth.

"I am so terribly sorry," Niles said honestly.

Acute embarrassment somehow made him seem that much more endearing, and Penelope couldn't find it in her heart to twist the knife any further. As he led her off the dance floor, she said, "It's all right. It's only a piece of cloth."

"I can't believe I was so clumsy. I've never done that before."

"It's only a small tear," she assured him, her enjoyment of his discomfort interrupted by a rising tide of guilt. A torn gown was just the diversion she'd been needing. Not just to get away from Niles, but to slip upstairs and put her latest Robin Hood scheme into motion. And how easy it had been to manipulate. Just a flick of her wrist had put the hem of her gown right under his down-stepping toes, and if anyone deserved to suffer a bit of humility, it was Niles. If for no

other reason than to avenge her injured pride for those two days last week when she couldn't sit down without feeling the effects of his handiwork.

"I'll buy you a new gown," Niles promised.

Damn the man! He was actually starting to be likeable!

"Don't be silly," Penelope said, waving her hand. "Look, there's Anne. I'm certain either she or her mother will have just the thing to pin me back together again. I'll be good as new and ready to finish our dance in no time."

Niles started, glancing down at her quickly. "Do you mean willingly? I won't have to chase you around the banquet table to regain your hand?"

Penelope half smiled, hardly able to believe it herself, either. "No, I promise to submit myself to another round of your insufferable arrogance. If only to prove that I don't regard this accident as entirely your fault and am bearing you no ill will because of it." For a moment, Niles could only stare at her until Penelope was compelled to add, "But I still don't like you."

That brought his smile back. "But you are willing to dance with me again."

Fighting the urge to laugh, Penelope said, "I will be back before you even notice I've gone."

"And I'll be waiting for you right here," Niles replied.

Shaking her head and trying hard not to be thoroughly flattered that he would even bother himself to say something so sweet, much less to sound as if he truly meant it, Penelope made her way through the crush of people to meet with Anne Ashford. Between her torn gown and her life long friendship

with the only daughter of Lady Ashford, it didn't take Penelope long to win access to her hostess's sitting room. For the second time in her career, Lady Robin Hood did her best to help the poor via one some trinket, which would not hopefully be easily missed.

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CHAPTER FIVE

Convincing Anne to allow Penelope solitary access into the sitting room of a lady of the house was easier than Penelope would have suspected.

Being an heiress certainly had its advantages. Not only was Anne's dance card already full but, despite her plump figure, the pretty young woman was surrounded by admirers. A veritable court of suitors paid her homage, all vying to win her undivided attention, to make her smile, to make her blush, whatever it took to put themselves favorably in her mind.

Most of the young men Penelope recognized as fortune hunters, after nothing more than a convenient marriage and the money that would accompany Anne's willingly given 'I do'. But a few, like Rupert Reeves, who had managed to insinuate himself into the circle of would-be beaus just to the right of Anne's elbow, had barely enough money of their own to be considered sincere in their attentions.

Although far from princely, as the second son of an officer of Parliament, his coffers weren't exactly empty. Still, as Penelope approached the group, she couldn't help but admire his courage. As good a friend though he might be, even Penelope would have thought him a little bit out of his league in the pursuit of an Ashford girl.

But one look at Anne's face as she turned to smile at something Rupert had said, clearly showed that the handsomely dowered Ashford girl in question disagreed. Her

affections, Penelope could see, had already been assigned. She couldn't have been happier for them both.

And it certainly worked to her advantage as well.

As Penelope squeezed her way into the group, she took hold of Anne's arm and pulled her a little to one side.

"Oh, your beautiful dress!" Anne cried as she caught sight of the torn flounce.

"It was my fault entirely," Penelope assured her. "And poor Granville, I very nearly tripped him right there on the floor! All I need is the use of your sitting room and a few pins and I should be as good as new."

Anne nodded agreement. "Absolutely. I'll take you to my room. We'll have you right as rain and back in Lord Granville's arms before you know it!"

But just at that moment, the musicians began the notes to a lively quadrille, and Anne turned to look at Rupert. Both suddenly seemed crestfallen.

"It's all right," Rupert said magnanimously. "I am willing, albeit reluctantly so, to sacrifice our dance. Go and help our dear Miss Blayne repair her gown."

"Nonsense!" Penelope told them both. "There's no sense in both of us missing out on the fun. In all the years that I've known you, Anne, I cannot count the number of times that I've been to your boudoir for tea. By now, I should think I know the way by heart. And it is just a few pins. As you said yourself, I'll be right as rain in no time. You two go on with your dance, and I shall see you both just as soon as I've pinned this pesky ruffle back into place."

Anne hesitated, the teachings of her good-hostess mother no doubt filling her head. "Well," she hedged. "If you don't think you need any help..."

"For a little thing like this?" Penelope lifted her skirts just enough to show off the insignificance of the tear. "Why, I shall be back in no time at all!"

Anne turned to look up at Rupert and they both smiled. As he took her hand and led her to the dance floor, Anne called back to Penelope over one shoulder, "The pins are in my top dresser drawer!"

Penelope smiled and waved, watching them go. But once the young lovers were arm in arm on the dance floor, she slipped quietly from the room. She passed two servants and Lord Stawel—to whom she nodded—in the hall, but there was nobody in sight by the time she reached Anne's room. She slipped inside completely unnoticed.

It was for a worthy cause, she told herself in an attempt to silence the twinge of conscience that announced itself as she thought of what she was about to do to her friend. It would be something small, she thought. Something that Anne would never miss and never even desire to have back again.

Unlike Lady Spencer's room, Anne's was decorated in warm and soft pastel colors that welcomed one to stay. Unfortunately, the time was ticking relentlessly by and Penelope couldn't afford to linger long. She quickly found Anne's jewelry box and picked the simple token lock with a hairpin. The treasure trove inside was everything a young girl just budding into womanhood could hope for, and it only took

a few minutes to find the perfect piece to steal: a tiny sapphire ring, wedged into a neglected corner.

"Perfect," Penelope said, holding the ring up to the light. But her reflection was interrupted by a soft sound in the outer hall, a sound that only served to remind her of just how precarious her situation right now was.

Dropping the ring into her pocket, she quickly put everything back where she found it and pinned up her petticoat. She was in and out of Anne's room in less than five minutes, and slipped back into through the ballroom doors just as the quadrille was ending.

Her eyes quickly sought out Anne and Rupert, just coming off the dance floor, their cheeks rosy from the liveliness of the dance and laughing together. Penelope waved, gave her gown a shake to show them that her torn flounce would stay firmly into place for the rest of the evening, and then mouthed a quick thank you.

She then waved to Aunt Agatha across the room, who was giving her a very stern hawk's-eye glare. Hands on her plump hips, she was busily tapping her foot upon the floor. Oh well, her aunt's feather's would unruffle quickly enough once Penelope had a chance to explain where she'd been. And in the meantime...

Penelope turned around, searching the room to find Niles. Sure enough, true to his word there he was, waiting exactly where he'd said he would be. His sister was at his side and the two were quietly talking, not quite with their backs to the door, although Niles hadn't yet noticed her return. She still didn't like him, she told herself as she picked her way through

the crowd to join them. But there was no denying how her heart skipped a tiny beat when he turned his head and their eyes met once more.

He smiled, and an entirely involuntary reaction caused her to press her hand over her chest, as if she could still the sudden wild thumping of her heart.

Penelope gave herself a stern mental shake. There was absolutely no way on Earth that she would allow herself to fall in love with a man who enjoyed spanking grown women. Particularly not if she was going to continue embarking on this budding career in thievery. And yet, when he smiled, she seemed to melt just a little bit all the way down to her knees.

Oh, she really did need to get herself under tighter control!

* * * *

"So, have you set your heart?" Angel asked as Niles climbed up into the Townshend coach and sat down beside her.

He groaned, closing his eyes with ill-concealed relief as he stretched his long legs out ahead of him. Wiggling his toes as much as he could without first removing his shoes, he would be so happy to get back home and take them off. It had been far too long since he'd last tried to dance the night away. This evening's activities had drawn him to a sad but unmistakable conclusion: he was either sorely out of practice or too old for this sort of nonsense. Personally, he believed himself to be a victim of the latter.

"How can anyone really set their hearts for another person?" he replied blithely.

"You danced with the girl four times," Angel pointed out. "If I hadn't waylaid her auntie, I'm fairly certain she'd have charged across the dance floor and given you a good scolding for your presumption."

"Well, all right." Niles turned his face to the window, hiding his smile. "Maybe I am just the slightest bit set."

His sister chuckled. "The way you looked at that poor Caldwell boy when he danced with Miss Blayne makes me think you are more than just 'the slightest bit' anything. Heavens, but your face grew so dark, for a moment I was afraid I'd have to hold you back lest you throw yourself upon the youth and exact upon him a terrible and physical retribution!"

"If he'd pulled her once inch closer," Niles growled, "I might have."

"Yes," Angel said drily. "I can see you're hardly stricken by her at all."

Niles gave her an equally wry look, but only smiled and the carriage rocked just a little as the driver clucked to the horses and they began to move. It was a slow process, merging into the long line of departing revelers, headed either home and to bed or to another party somewhere else. Niles was ready for home and he relayed that exact request to the driver.

"You're getting old," his sister pouted.

"I told your husband I'd have you back before dawn."

"He's getting old, too." But she folded her hands in her lap, declining to press the issue. Instead, she decided to start a different one. "So.... how fares the tattered flounce?"

Niles winced. "You saw that, did you?"

"I'm afraid, my darling brother, so did half the room."

Tsking and shaking his head, Niles said, "I can't believe I was that clumsy. My dancing skills must be even more rusty than I thought. I don't even remember falling out of step. How could I have done something so graceless."

Eyes falling half closed, Angel gave him a silkily gloating smile. "You didn't. I happened to be watching right at the moment that she ever so sweetly laid the hem of her gown beneath your feet."

He stared at her in disbelief. "She did not either."

Angel continued to smile.

"But that doesn't make any sense. Why would she do that?"

His sister spread her hands in a mild shrug. "Obviously she needed a torn petticoat and you were readily and obliviously available to oblige her."

After a moment's of silent confusion, Niles said, "Why would anyone need a torn flounce? And if she wanted to get away from me so desperately, why would she come back again only a few minutes later?"

"That is the question of the hour, isn't it?"

"That makes no sense." Niles turned his face to the window, thoroughly disconcerted. He had seen her face up close, studied it in the glow of the ballroom lights. He'd paid particular attention to her expressions. After that first dance, he hadn't notice much in the way of irritation. He liked to think she'd warmed up to him a bit. Especially after that second dance, when he'd gotten her to smile. And not just a half hearted curve of her entirely too kissable lips, but with

actual robust grins that had even occasionally been coupled with laughter. Honest laughter. Now he knew he was mildly besotted with her, but could he really be so far gone already as to miss the crafty shadow of deceit as it played upon her lovely features just before she deliberately made a fool of him?

He tried to think back to the first dance. Immensely irritated, yes, she had been that. But could she really have used him and then looked into his face and lied just to further his embarrassment?

Niles shook his head. "No, I don't believe it. Angel, you must be mistaken."

"I tell you, my dear brother, that girl is up to something," his sister insisted. Her eyes narrowed slightly as she turned to look out the window. "I do so wonder what it is."

* * * *

Aunt Agatha wrapped an arm around both Anstince's and Penelope's shoulders, pulling the girls close in a rare hug. "A Wentworth and a Granville! Congratulations, girls! I am ever so proud of you both!" She then noisily air kissed each with a kiss upon their cheeks and headed upstairs for bed, muttering all the way, "We shall have to plan a trip to Almack's next. There will be dozens of available suitors there, so we'll need new dresses for that. Absence only makes the heart grow fonder ... especially if they can see you with someone else."

Anstice giggled as she watched the older woman ascend the stairs. "Me thinks our dear auntie would like to see us married and gone."

Considering the state of their father's finances, Penelope couldn't really blame her. But she bit her tongue rather than say anything in front of Anstice. Her younger sister didn't handle stress very well. So instead she asked, "Are you hungry at all?"

"Mm," Anstice wrinkled her nose. "Not really. I wouldn't mind a little something sweet though."

"I'll get us something from the kitchen, then."

"I'll meet you upstairs." Anstice picked up her skirts and jogged up the stairs, no doubt in a hurry to record the evening's highlights in her diary.

Penelope watched her go and then opened her reticle. She took out the ring to look at it. She still felt the smallest tinge of guilt for having taken something that belonged to a dear friend. But, on the other hand, surely if she had but asked, no doubt Anne would gladly have offered up the ring herself for so important a cause as the one Penelope was championing.

"Of course, she would have," Penelope said softly and tucked the ring back into her handbag. Anne was a sweet and loving girl in her own right. She could no more endure the suffering of the indigent than Penelope could herself. And that one small ring, insignificant trinket though it was to a family as wealthy as the Ashford's, was still worth enough to make a difference in Montague Close.

Feeling somewhat mollified, Penelope ventured down the hall to the kitchen. Robbing the pantry of the last of piece of poppy cake, she poured two glasses of milk and took them upstairs with her to bed.

After helping one another out of their evening gowns, the sisters climbed up into Penelope's bed to indulge their sweet teeth, cuddled down in a billow of blankets, their backs braced against a pillow-strewn headboard.

"You seemed to get on well enough with Lord Wentworth," Penelope commented, winning a grin from her sister as she licked a dollop of frosting from her finger.

"He said I had the stars in my eyes tonight." Anstice laughed. "He introduced me to his mother. She wasn't exactly rude, but I don't think she approves of her son paying all his attention to a dowerless prospect. You should have seen it, though. Harry looked her right in the eye and said, 'Since I have no concrete plans on Monday, I think I should like to invite the Misses Blayne and their father to tea.' Oh, you should have seen the look on her face. She was not pleased to hear it, not pleased at all. Not that Harry seemed to care. And he was grand to listen to anyway."

"Wentworth is a very good catch. I'm very happy for you both."

Anstice's smile dimmed a little. "Yes, well, I didn't have the heart to tell him we'd probably never be able to get Papa away from his rocks long enough to attend."

"Aunt Agatha will make sure he's there; you need not fear on that score," Penelope predicted. "It's a good thing you're my sister. Otherwise I should be so terrible jealous of you; you'll be marrying for both love and money."

"Maybe you will, too," Anstice said hopefully. "Lord Granville seems like a good man. He's an earl and he certainly has money. Everyone says so."

"Well, sometimes he's a good man," Penelope grudgingly admitted. "When he's not being brutish and overbearing and insufferably high-handed."

"Personally I think you needed a high-hand taken to you the other day, so maybe he did you some good."

"Anstice!" Penelope scolded.

"I wouldn't have thought to give you a spanking," her sister stubbornly continued. "But it seems to have been just the thing to knock all that silly Robin Hood nonsense right out of your system. You might not think so now, but someday you'll be grateful to him for paddling the stuffing out of you."

"It's a good thing I've finished my milk or you'd be wearing it right now."

"Fat lot of good that would do you, too. I'm in your bed; you'd have to sleep on the wet spot, so who'd have the last laugh there? Ha!"

Penelope smiled while her sister laughed. "It would be a small sacrifice on my part."

Anstice finished off the last of the cake, still chuckling, though she gradually grew sober again. "You know, I do believe I pity poor Anne Ashford and girls of her ilk."

A little startled, Penelope looked at her. "Pity her? Why on Earth for? She's got all the money she could ever need!"

"My point exactly. We know Harry and Granville like us for the people that we are. Everyone knows we haven't any money at all. But Anne, how can she ever know whether her beaus are attracted to her because they want her.... or because they want her money?"

"She seems to like Rupert. And he isn't the sort to care if the object of his affections comes with fat coffers or not."

"Mr. Reeves?" Anstice snorted, a decisively unladylike sound. "Anne's mama will never grant him her daughter's hand and you know it, the poor dear man. Still, if only he were half the dancer that Harry is—and if only he didn't insist on wearing that ghastly shade of yellow all the time—I should probably have liked him, too."

Penelope smiled. "How fortunate for Lord Wentworth that Rupert is truly fond of marigold shirts."

Anstice hugged her knees to her chest, smiling dreamily down at the blankets. "Harry is so kind, too. And such an excellent dancer. I had a wonderful time tonight, Penelope. I am so very glad that you declined to do anything foolish. Admittedly, I did suspect you up to something when you made Granville step on your petticoat. For a moment it looked suspiciously as if you meant him to tear it..." Anstice's voice trailed off, as she realized her sister was no longer meeting her eyes, but staring sideways off the bed and picking at the coverlet with both hands. The look on Penelope's face was the same one she used to wear when, as children, they were trying to convince their Mama that they hadn't been into mischief.

Anstice gasped. "Penelope, you didn't! Tell me you didn't!"

"I—" Penelope hesitated on the brink of the lie. "I didn't?" she finished weakly.

Grabbing one of the pillows she was reclining on, Anstice smacked her in the chest. "Don't you tell me tall tales, you fibber! You promised! You swore you wouldn't!"

Penelope quickly caught the pillow before Anstice could smack her again. "I said I wouldn't do anything to embarrass you with Wentworth. And I didn't! I was very discreet!"

"How could you?" Anstice wailed. "How could you steal from Lady Ashford? She knew our Mama. She knows Aunt Agatha. Our two families have been friends for generations! How could you do it?"

Penelope picked at the blanket again. "I didn't."

Her eyebrows drawing suspiciously downward, Anstice asked, "You didn't steal anything?"

Penelope shook her head, but then her conscience got the best of her. "Not from Lady Ashford."

Her sister's jaw dropped nearly to her chest and her eyes grew wide. She gave Penelope a long wounded look before whispering, "You stole from Anne?"

"It was only one little ring. The sapphire is barely more than a speck, truly!"

"Penelope," Anstice moaned. "You will ruin us all."

"Only if I get caught, and I assure you I have every intention of never having that happen!"

"I imagine most criminals share that very optimism!"

Penelope drew back as if slapped. "I hardly think I qualify as a—"

"This has gone too far out of hand," Anstice groaned, covering her eyes with both hands. "Just what do you think is going to happen should Lady Spencer or Anne discover their jewelry missing? Their poor maids will be turned off without references, that's what!"

"Then we'll hire them ourselves."

"How many maids do you think we can have before Aunt Agatha gets suspicious? For how long do you think you can pretend to faint before someone calls in a doctor? Before the gossips begin to wonder what could be causing your delicate state and what will poor Granville say when he finds out? This is a dangerous game that you're playing, why can't you see that? Eventually, someone somewhere is going to catch you in the act. They will notice your suspicious behavior and then you will be caught!"

Penelope leaned back against her headboard, sighing, "You are being very dramatic. The only reason you find my behavior suspicious is because you already know what I'm doing. From anyone else's point of view, a torn hem is a simple accident and any one can feel faint, particularly after the crab cakes we ate tonight."

"Have you no conscience at all?" Anstice said softly. "Can you be so selfish that you would risk the ruination of our whole family for the sake of your cause?"

"Selfish?" Penelope stared at her, hurt. "I've been anything but selfish! I haven't kept not one penny of what I've taken. You know that!"

"It doesn't matter if you give the money away or not! The jewels were never yours to sell in the first place!" Tears flooded Anstice's eyes as she sharply shook her head. Her voice thick with anguish, she whispered, "What does it matter if Harry—Lord Wentworth offers for me or not? How could I ever accept his proposal knowing that I shall end up disgracing him forever when I am hanged as a criminal!"

Covering her mouth with her hand, she flung herself from the bed and fled the room in tears.

"Anstice!" Penelope started to get up, but when her sister only slammed the door, she fell back down among the unmade mountain of blankets and pillows. She blinked several times, her fingers fidgeting in the folds of the bed. Suppose someone did catch her? It was a risk, but one that she had been aware of from the very start. Surely the purity of her motive and the worthiness of the cause outweighed the wrongfulness of the deeds. Didn't they?

Penelope chewed at her bottom lip. She loved her sister, and the urge to go after her, to reassure her and dry her tears, was almost overwhelming. But in the end, she only blew out the lights and crawled into bed.

Sleep was far from easy to attain, however. And when she finally did slip beyond awareness, her dreams were haunted by accusations. Her mother's and father's anguished eyes were the hardest to face.

"We didn't raise you like this," her mama cried.

Then her face faded into Anstice's, who wept, "We will be hanged for criminals! How could you? How could you?"

Penelope turned away, unable to bear her sister's tears, only to find Niles coming out of the shadows, rolling up his shirt sleeves to reveal taut, sinewy arms and clenched and angry hands.

He stalked her with measured steps, growling, "You and I are about to have a discussion. And I promise you, young lady, this time you will not get off as lightly as before!"

Penelope froze, unable to move as he came closer, and the wayward thought, 'I deserve this,' flew through her mind before she could stop it.

"No." She shook her head and tried to back up a step, but he kept right on coming. Only now his hands weren't empty any more. Instead, in his right hand he held the butter paddle that had been the dreaded nemesis from her childhood, and to Penelope's utter mortification, her bottom began to tingle with the anticipation of once more feeling the sharp sting as that plane of hard wood smacked into the bare flesh there.

Her hands snapped back behind her, but there were neither skirts nor petticoats to act as any kind of barrier between her buttocks and her hands. Even her knickers were missing; dropped down into a puddle of satin and lace around her ankles. She stared down at her bared legs in shock. Dressed in only her corset, her underwear tangling around her feet, she snapped her head back up to stare at Niles.

"Over my knee, my girl," he commanded, pulling a straight backed chair out of empty air to sit himself upon.

Penelope spun around instead and tried to run. She tripped over her knickers and fell straight into the one-armed grasp of a black-hooded executioner. In his other hand, he gripped a massive and bloody ax.

Penelope awoke barely in time to stifle her scream an instant before her head was lopped from her shoulders. She sat bolt upright in bed, grabbing her throat with both hands.

It was still night, and her head was still firmly attached. Her room was as black as pitch everywhere but along the foot of her bed and the surrounding floor where a sliver of

moonlight filtered in through a crack in the drapes to illuminate it. Beyond the frantic pounding of her heart, the rest of the house was utterly quiet. Utterly still. There were no footsteps anywhere that she could hear. No Niles crossing the floor to begin his 'discussion' and, more importantly, no executioner melting out of the shadows with bloody ax in tow.

Panting raggedly, it took several minutes before Penelope calmed down enough to realize that the skin of her bottom was still tingling horribly, smarting almost, as if it had already suffered under the erstwhile attentions of that dread butter paddle.

With one hand on her throat, she tentatively reached back to caress her prickling flesh. She began to shake. "Oh my," she sobbed, "what have I done?"

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CHAPTER SIX

Trying to go back to sleep after a nightmare like that, particularly when the shadows around her bed seemed to delight in fooling her eyes and forming shapes that resembled the executioner out of nothing, was the last thing Penelope wanted. Crawling out of bed, she donned her wrap and left her room. Her bare feet made only a whisper of sound as she padded down the carpeted hallway, past the guest bedrooms that housed the rest of her family, down the stairs and towards the kitchen.

The house, as it turned out, was not as still and quiet as she'd first believed. Instead, when she pushed open the heavy kitchen doors, she found the room awash in candlelight and her father perched upon a stool at the large cutting table where Cook prepared their meals. There were two empty boxes at his feet and twin rows of his beloved rocks stretched out before him, all triangle shaped old bones arranged by size, with the largest in the middle stretching out into the smaller shapes as far as the table extended to either side.

The clothes he wore were the same ones she'd seen him in two days ago. In all likelihood, he had been so caught up in his studies that he'd completely forgotten to change. Or to bathe, as was evident the minute she walked into the room. He probably hadn't even slept, for there was a haggard, unshaven and tired look about him as he adjusted the second row of hand-sized fossils across the table.

He looked up, startled, when she reached the cutting table and picked up one of the pieces. "Good heavens!" he said, his bushed eyebrows rising nearly to his hairline in surprise. "Is it morning already?"

"No," Penelope softly told him. "It's still very early." She looked at the obvious tooth that she held in her hand, brown with age but still very sharp, its serrated edge quite visible. A part of her couldn't help but wonder what about this tooth her father could find so much more fascinating than his own family. She felt the weight in her palm, bouncing it slightly. Except for its size and shape, it didn't look any more interesting to her than any other stone. She did concede that, at a good five or six inches in length, the creature that had lost this tooth must have been a monster.

"What was it?" she asked.

Arthur Blayne glanced from the tooth to her with a look of pleasant surprise spreading across his tired face. "A shark. A very large shark. Fortunately for the sailing industry, I believe the beast to be long since extinct. Fascinating, isn't it?" He spread his arms to encompass the whole of the table, lovingly caressing the fossils. "Not all of these teeth came from the same animal, naturally. But using a modern day shark as my model, I have estimated this to be the size of the creature's jaw. Magnificent, don't you think?"

Penelope looked at two rows, the upper and lower teeth, but to her it just looked like a table full of rocks. She lay the tooth back in its proper place and pulled a chair up to the table, sitting down across from him. "Father, may I ask you a question?"

He blinked at her twice, fidgeting to adjust the tooth she'd taken, but eventually nodded. "Of course, my pet." Turning slightly away from the table, he faced her reluctantly and did his best to assume a paternal role. "What is it?"

Tracing her finger along the edge of the table, not quite meeting his eyes, she asked, "Does the end always justify the means?"

"How do you mean?"

Penelope was silent, but there was no real way to get the answer she needed without revealing something of her problem. She cleared her throat nervously. "I—I have this friend who may have done something that most people would regard as wrong, even though the things she's done were accomplished with the best of intentions." Beneath the fringe of her bangs, she looked at him hopefully. "Would that make her good or bad, do you think?"

Arthur only blinked again. "I suppose that would depend upon the kind of wrong she did. I would be hard pressed to condemn the theft of a loaf of bread to feed herself or her family. But on the other hand, I would be equally reluctant to condone murder."

Penelope picked up another tooth. Fiddling with it in her hands, she avoided looking at him as she confessed, "She—my friend, you understand—may have taken one or two things—little things—that didn't belong to her and sold them." At the look that crossed his face, she quickly added, "She didn't keep any of the money. She gave it all, every penny, to those who needed it more than she did. You know, like Robin Hood. And the only reason she took these things in the first

place was because she didn't have any money herself. And she only took little things, jewelry that wouldn't be missed from people so wealthy that they'd probably never notice the thefts anyway." She paused, biting her bottom lip. "Of course, I know it's still wrong. But, Papa, would it be.... you know, wrong?"

"Well..." He drew a deep breath, his eyes drifted towards his waiting fossils. "I'm not sure. I suppose it would. Perhaps she should judge her actions by what her conscience tells her." He reached out with poorly suppressed longing to touch one of the teeth, tapping it with his forefinger. "What about you?" His finger stopped tapping and he looked back at her questioningly. "Did you participate of any of these thefts?"

"No, no!" she quickly told him, dropping the tooth and pushing abruptly away from the table. "Of course not. She—my friend—merely confided in me and I was trying to help her, that's all."

"Oh," he said, no change in his suddenly worried expression.

Afraid she might buckle if he continued to press her, she darted around the table to press a kiss to his brow. "Thank you, Papa. You may go back to your rocks now."

"Was I helpful?" he asked, once again surprised.

"Immensely," she lied, and he smiled and swivelled back around to face the cutting table. "You really should try to get some sleep."

His wizened hand reached out to pat her arm. "I suspect I will, once your aunt's cook comes to chase me from her kitchen."

More than anything, she would have liked to reach out and hug him. But she didn't. She only clasped her hands before her and nodded. "Good night then."

"Good night, pet."

It was, without a doubt, the longest conversation that she'd had with her father since her mother had died. There was nothing more that she could ask of him tonight.

She kissed his cheek one last time and then quietly went about to fixing two cups of warm milk. She left one on the table at his elbow and took the other back upstairs to bed. Nothing had been resolved, but at least she wasn't still seeing either the executioner or Niles lurking in the shadows.

Lying in bed with the lights put out, she sipped her milk until it was gone and then tried again to sleep. Rest was still a long time in coming, though, which left her plenty of time to think. She didn't want to give up on the poor of Montague Close. They needed her too much. But her conscience couldn't take stealing from close friends like Anne. Before she drifted off, she made up her mind that from now on, she would only practice her nefarious Good Samaritanism against those who harbored nothing more than a position of acquaintanceship in her heart.

* * * *

Although perhaps a more dedicated thief would have risen with the dawn to sell her previous night's work, Penelope simply couldn't manage it. When dawn's bright light finally filtered its way through the crack in her curtains and fell across her bed, Penelope only rolled over, putting her back to

the window and her face to the shadows, and promptly fell back to sleep. No sooner, it seemed, did she begin to drift off, than a soft rustling near the foot of her bed started her eyes wide open again.

The executioner!

Penelope sat bolt upright in bed with a shriek loud enough to wake the dead, but it was only the maid, Marie, bearing a tray of cocoa and cinnamon toast.

Startled, Marie jumped and screamed as well. She dropped her tray, spilling the food on the floor and shattering the fine china cup. She grabbed her chest. "Lor', Miss! You gave me such a start!"

Penelope had never possessed a mean or cruel bone before, not in all her body. But in the few seconds following her scare, when she realized the sound came from nothing more sinister than the maid, skulking at her bedside, Penelope developed one. She grabbed up her pillow and flung it at Marie, hitting the other woman in the shoulder.

With another shriek, Marie fled the room and Penelope flopped back into bed. She groaned, covering her face with the blankets, but two near death experiences, real or otherwise, in one morning was two too many to allow her a third chance at sleep. After twenty unsuccessful minutes of trying, she finally gave up and rolled out of bed.

A humble apology coupled with the gift of a fine lace shawl helped to soothe Marie's much abused sensibilities, but it did nothing to dispel the smothering gloom that hung over the Blayne household. The air grew thick with it when Penelope and Anstice joined one another for breakfast. Seated on

opposite sides of the table, Penelope was in a prime position to watch her younger sister pick at her food, shifting it around her plate without actually eating any of it herself. Penelope understood the subconscious fast. Every bite that she managed to force down was as appetizing as chewing paper.

"Are you still angry with me?" Penelope finally broke down and asked.

"No," Anstice sighed. "I'm just tired. I didn't sleep well last night."

"Nightmares?"

"Yes."

"A hooded executioner with a big bloody ax?"

Anstice slid her a sideways glance. "No. Mine was completely unrelated to our argument."

"Oh."

Penelope waited expectantly until Anstice gave her another sideways look, then sighed. "Aunt Agatha was making pancakes for breakfast," she finally said. "But she made them so big that they completely overflowed the table and dragged the floor. And I don't know how it happened, but I wound up beneath one and every time I tried to cry out for help, she poured maple syrup on me and I'd choke."

Penelope stared at her, stunned and trying not to laugh.

"I told you," Anstice said. "Completely unrelated."

"I see," Penelope said, almost losing her composure to a stray smile, although one look at her little sister's face told her that such would have been a big mistake. "I'm very sorry. I'm sure your bad dreams were mostly my fault. I did a lot of

thinking last night and I want you to know, I think you were right."

Her sister sat up a little straighter. "You're going to stop stealing?"

Penelope blinked at her twice. "Well I—I didn't think you were that right. I mean—of course I'll stop stealing. Just as soon as we can afford to. But in the meantime, I've resolved not to take anything else belonging to people we consider our friends. Only acquaintances."

Anstice was unimpressed by her concession. "We're acquainted with half the town."

"But not all of them are friends," Penelope stressed. "They won't know me well enough to tell if I'm acting strangely or not. Wasn't that the whole point of your argument? That I would be detected?"

Anstice closed her eyes. She shook her head quietly before opening them again and fixing her sister with a saddened look. "Penelope my darling, I think you have no conscience left at all."

She stood up as if to leave the table, but the dining room door swung open before she could take even a single step and their aunt's butler, Graves, entered the room. "Lady Townshend and Lord Granville are here to see you both."

Anstice froze, a look of sheer panic flitting across her face while Penelope nearly dropped her tea in her lap. Suddenly all thumbs, her hands fumbled with the cup, spilling great dollops of brown liquid on the tablecloth—but fortunately missing her dress—before she managed to set it down again. She shot her sister a quick glance. "Uh..."

"We can't see them!" Anstice hissed. "Send them away, Graves!"

"No, wait...." Penelope said quickly, drumming her fingers nervously on the edge of the table. "Show them to the drawing room, please."

"What?" Anstice screeched in whispered tones.

Graves bowed and left.

"Penelope!" Anstice protested. "Why did you do that?"

"Are you trying to make Graves suspicious?"

"I should think you'd be more concerned with Lord Granville and his sister, than Aunt Agatha's butler! Why else would they be here, but that they're suspicious of last night? We're caught!"

Penelope jumped up from the table. Darting to the window, she peeked through the curtains, craning her neck to see around the corner of the house to the driveway. She only barely saw the back end of the Granville coach. "I don't see the constable." She popped her thumb nail into her mouth and chewed on it. "Would they have come without the constable if they knew?"

"Who can know the unfathomable minds of the law abiding!" Anstice snipped.

"Oh, stop it. We might yet be okay. They might not suspect anything."

"I'm going to wake Auntie."

Penelope leapt after her sister, grabbing her arm before Anstice reached the door. "No, you can't! If they are suspicious, then they may say something to make us say

something to make Aunt Agatha suspicious, and then we really *will* be caught!"

"Oh, what a tangled web we weave..."

"Don't start!" Penelope snapped. "Get a hold of yourself."

"We're done for. We may as well hang ourselves now from the chandelier and have done with it."

Penelope patted her hair and then smoothed her hands down the front of her dress. She shot her sister a withering look before heading for the door.

"Where are you going?"

"To get away from your melodramatics and find out what they want." She strode from the dining room with her younger sister most reluctantly in tow.

They passed Graves just outside the drawing room door.

"May we have tea and refreshments, please?" Penelope asked, then patted her hair one last time, gave her cheeks a pinch so she wouldn't look as pale and nervous as she felt, and walked inside.

Penelope's worst fear was that the first words out of Niles' mouth would be, "The game is up." But those fears were quickly waylaid—not when she saw him, standing at the window, his hands clasped loosely behind his back—but when he saw her. He beamed. "Penny, my love!"

"Penelope," she corrected automatically.

Seated at the piano, his sister, Angel, stood up when he started towards Penelope. "Niles," she said, in a suspiciously chaperoning tone. A tone which he ignored in much the same way he ignored Penelope's involuntary backwards step when he reached out to snag her hand. A smile tugged at the

corners of her mouth as he bent down, and though she thought him about to brush a kiss upon her knuckles, instead he turned her hand around and pressed his lips to the center of her sensitive palm. She tingled all the way to her toes at the intimate touch.

"You came all this way just to kiss my hand?" she asked, relaxing just a bit.

"At the moment, your hand is all that I am permitted to kiss." Still bent in a courtly bow, his twinkling eyes met her gaze and his smile turned positively rakish as he said, "However, I could happily nibble my way north." His voice lowered for her ears alone. "Or even to that most delightful southern destination, if you should so desire it. I know I would."

Penelope's smile faltered to slight confusion. "You mean my toes? I knew you had a penchant for bottoms; do you also have one for feet?"

"I was not referring to your feet, no."

She blinked again. "My knees?"

"A little further north."

Anstice poked her head up over Penelope's shoulder, chirping, "I think he meant your thighs. Didn't you mean her thighs, Lord Granville? Or he could mean your bottom. That would go right along with his spanking fetish, don't you think?"

Niles stood up the instant he saw her. "Uh..." he said, his face flushing slightly.

"Personally, I think he means your thighs," Anstice said again to Penelope. "No one wants to kiss a bottom."

"What are you telling those girls?" Angel suddenly asked, coming up behind him.

"Why in the world would you want to kiss me on the legs?" Penelope asked, wrinkling her nose.

Niles glanced from Anstice to his sister, and then took Penelope's arm, leading her into the room and to the settee. "Never mind. I'll tell you later."

"Have you come to pay court to my sister?" Anstice asked, following close behind them.

"Actually, no." Gesturing for her to sit, Niles lowered himself onto the cushions beside her. "We just happened to be in the area—"

"We drove seven miles out of our way to be in the area," Angel interjected wryly.

Niles gave her a look, and in a slightly louder tone, continued, "And I decided to stop by and inquire after your gown. I don't suppose it will recover to dance again?"

Still gathering reasons for why he should want to kiss her on the legs, Penelope was paying more attention to the odd sensation that had suffused her thighs, and particularly in between them, as she considered the how and whys of such a desire. She had never been so aware of any one aspect of her anatomy the way she had come to be since first meeting Niles. The way he made her body tingle, she was almost ready to liken her disturbingly physical reactions to him with a really good case of the hives.

"Penelope," Anstice said, catching her attention.

Penelope looked from her to Niles. "I beg your pardon, what?"

Rather than repeat his question, Niles only grinned and asked, "Would you like to take a walk with me?"

His smile truly was bewitching. It made her forget all about hives, constables, hooded executioners and getting caught. When he held out his hand, she lay her own into it and stood up with him. Vaguely she heard Anstice say something about fetching Aunt Agatha, but Angel waylaid her with a calmly interjected, "We'll just walk along behind them, shall we? What trouble can they possibly get into with both our eyes upon them?"

Staring after Penelope, Anstice hardly looked convinced. "Why would he want to kiss her thighs?"

"I have no idea," Angel smoothly lied. "I suspect it's likely one of those unfathomable 'man' things women aren't expected to understand."

* * * *

The dew had dried upon the grass, the Morning Glories had closed their blossoms for the day, and the roses were in full bloom in Aunt Agatha's flower beds around the side of the house and all through the spacious and well-maintained back yard. Hands clasped behind her back, strolling alongside Niles with Angel and Anstice following a good twenty yards behind them, Penelope listened to his casual chatter with only half an ear. It was good to know that she hadn't aroused his suspicions with her antics the night before, but between her nightmares and Anstice's nervous stares, which Penelope could feel burrowing into her back, she was finding it very

difficult to pretend that nothing was wrong just to keep him ignorant.

Sadly, she wasn't even very good at it. Niles seemed easily able to tell that her heart wasn't into entertaining his company.

"Is everything all right?" he finally asked the second time he had to repeat a question because she hadn't been paying attention.

Startled, she declared a little too loudly and too quickly. "Oh yes! Absolutely. Certainly. Of course. Why wouldn't it be?"

"You aren't acting quite yourself today."

She laughed, a high-pitched and vaguely strained sound. "I shouldn't think that you know me well enough to know if I am acting strangely or not."

"I didn't say 'strangely'; I said 'not quite yourself.' But all right," he conceded, "let us say you seem to be overly distracted."

"I'm not distracted," she contradicted.

"Okay. Then what are you?"

"I am—" she floundered under his steady gaze. "Deep in thought."

"They seem to be troubling thoughts, considering the weighty frowns pulling down the corners of your mouth. Is it something I can help with?"

Penelope's mind went blank. Short of telling him the truth, she couldn't think of a single explanation for why she should be so distant. "It's nothing.... really...."

"Oh come now," Niles said smoothly. "I have a vested interest in all things Penelope. I would love a chance to play the knight in shining armor to your unconquerable dragons. And besides, if it's enough to occupy your mind and keep you from enjoying my meager attempts at courtship, then I think I am entitle to an explanation."

Penelope glanced up at him, but then suddenly noticed that they had drawn abreast of the garden shed. In that instant, she could all but feel herself bent again across his thigh, ready to receive a smarting bottom for her sins. Penelope snapped around, changing directions immediately and leaving the shed at her back to lose herself among the rose bushes instead.

"Ah ha!" Niles said, quickening his pace to catch up with her. "I see that's still a sore point with you."

"I do not appreciate the pun," she sniffed.

He chuckled. "I'm sorry."

"The memories are still too fresh for me, I fear. Just to look at the place makes my bottom hurt."

"Some might suspect that to be the effects of a guilty conscience speaking to you."

Penelope stiffened. "I really don't think so. According to Anstice, I haven't got a conscience. Guilty or otherwise."

Aware that he had suddenly begun to study her face, she looked away.

"I beg your pardon," Niles said slowly. "If my attempt at humor struck a raw nerve, I apologize."

Although silence was less incriminating, Penelope felt an overwhelming need to explain her brusqueness. "It's all right.

I simply do not want to find myself back in the garden shed for no good reason."

"I would never take you to the garden shed, or anyplace else for that matter, for 'no good reason'," Niles told her firmly. "There would always be a reason, a good one, and the punishment would always fit the crime in question."

"What if I didn't want to be spanked?" she protested. "I think it's a silly way for a grown man to treat a grown woman anyway."

"Silly or not, sometimes it's something grown women need. And whether you want to be spanked or not is irrelevant. It's what you need that matters most, and that is what a dutiful husband and lover should pay his attention to."

Penelope stopped on the garden path and turned to face him. "But why spanking? It just doesn't seem right, to profess to love a woman and then hurt her so."

Niles reached out to cup her cheek. "My dear Penny, if a man didn't love a woman, he wouldn't bother to spank her for her misbehaviors."

Penelope blinked, but didn't draw out of his touch until she heard Angel clearing her throat over a dozen yards behind them. Niles closed his eyes, but then with a wry smile, removed his hand from her cheek and took a healthy step backwards.

"If a man—" Penelope stopped, not sure how to ask the question burning at the tip of her tongue. "If he loved her and.... and she did something wrong.... could it ever be so wrong that he wouldn't spank her?"

"Why?" Niles countered. "Is there something you've done that necessitates such a question?" Ignoring Angel all together, he stepped closer again, lower his voice so only Penelope could hear him. "Penny my love, have you done something to deserve a sound dose of that bare bottom medicine?"

She quickly looked away, lest her face betray her. Suddenly realizing how close she was to simply confessing right here and now, she tried to laugh it away. Some Robin Hood she was! "Heavens, no! I've already told you, I've no interest in that sort of thing. And you've already been too free with my person in that regard. Believe me, my lord, I've no interest in sampling the iron-hard solidity of your palm again."

Her breath caught when he continued to study her without speaking, without even blinking, for what felt like an age. Then he held out his hand to take her own. "Shall we return to the house before your aunt discovers you missing and sets loose the hounds in search of us?"

He wasn't going to press her. He wasn't going to learn about her penchant for thievery. Anstice would still have a chance to win Lord Wentworth's heart. Penelope breathed a sigh of relief. "Please."

She let her hand be tucked into the crook of his elbow, but he didn't start back to the house right away. Instead, she found herself once again the focus of his careful study.

"Would you tell me, I wonder, if ever you did do something for which you knew you should be disciplined?"

Penelope stopped breathing all over again as his gaze bore down into her own. How on Earth was she supposed to answer such a double-edged question? Her knees began to tremble, but she managed to shake her head yes.

"Absolutely," she lied, crossing her fingers behind her back.

"I'm glad to hear that you've nothing to hide from me." He patted her hand and smiled once again. "Although perhaps now would be a good time to mention that the punishment for confessing to a wrong is always going to be significantly less than if, say, I was forced to uncover the naughty deed for myself." He gave her hand a loving squeeze. "Let's go back to the house."

Penelope stumbled blindly along beside him. She had the most horrible sinking feeling that such a comment might mean he was about to start looking.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

Standing at the bottom of the front steps, watching as the Granville coach driver helped Angel up into the carriage, Penelope was trying her best not to wring her hands with worry.

"Tell me, Miss Blayne," said Niles, "do you plan to attend the Howell's rout next week?"

"Yes," she replied, twisting her fingers in the folds of her gown in an attempt to hide her worried fidgeting.

"Then I hope you will save me a waltz." Though he smiled when she agreed, there was—something—in his eyes that belied his relaxed mannerisms. If he hadn't been suspicious when he'd first arrived, he certainly was now. She knew he didn't know what to look for, but he did know enough to start looking and the thought of what he might find made her throat close as tightly as if she were already in the grips of a noose. From now on, she was going to have to be extra, extra careful not to get caught.

"Suddenly next week seems an awfully long time to wait, but I suppose I shall simply have to suffer along until I see you again." Niles bowed to press one last tantalizing kiss into her sensitive palm. "That is, of course, unless I can persuade you to come driving with me tomorrow morning...?"

Her breath caught and, for one startled moment, as her captured hand tingled in his charming caress, she almost smiled. There had to be something truly wrong with her, Penelope thought. To on the one hand fear the man who

could bring her low for the good works she was trying to do, and yet to so look forward to seeing him again. The devil must truly sit on her shoulders, for all she could think to say was, "Persuade away, my lord. I would love to go."

It was Anstice who valiantly tried to pull Penelope back from the brink of the yawning precipice she ever so diligently was trying to fall from. "Penelope dear, I thought your morning tomorrow was rather booked up." She gave her sister a meaningful look. "You know, that important *errand* you have to run."

The ring. Penelope's eyes widened and her mouth rounded in an 'O' of understanding. "Oh yes," she said quickly. "Right. I'm sorry. I forgot about that."

Niles looked from one sister to the other, then he smiled. "Not a problem. I would be more than happy to take you on your errand."

"No!" exclaimed both sisters in unison.

"Um ... That won't be necessary," Penelope added in a slightly calmer voice. "No reason to put you out, my lord. I—I can just as easily be run my task earlier in the day and.... and go driving with you later in the afternoon."

Her face burned under Niles renewed scrutiny, but he and Angel merely bid her goodbye. After one last speculative look, Niles followed his sister up into the back of his coach and the Granville carriage pulled slowly away from the steps. Penelope waved when he glanced out the window to look back at her, but as soon as the carriage was out of earshot, she turned on her sister. "What in Heaven's name were you thinking?"

"I don't know!" Anstice cried back. "I am just worried about you getting rid of that awful ring before someone discovers it in your possession. The last thing you need is for Lord Granville to pay you court while you're trying to hawk your stolen cache of jewelry!"

"One ring is hardly a cache." Penelope popped her thumbnail back into her mouth and began to chew on it again. "Still, you're right. I'm sorry; I know you're right."

"And you know we really should pay a call on poor Anne. You know, that nice friend of ours whom you *robbed*—" Anstice paused long enough to give her sister a hard look, "—and thank her for all her hospitality last night. Although I swear I honestly don't relish having to face her again, knowing what we've done..."

"I'll send a note," Penelope interrupted smoothly. "Besides, we'll be seeing her soon enough at the Howells'. In the meantime, I have to sell this ring and take the money to Montague Close. Come with me, Anstice. I'm certain Mr. Hucks would love to see you again."

"No. I want nothing to do with this mad scheme you've concocted." Turning on her heel, Anstice marched back up the stairs and into the house.

"Oh please," her sister begged, hurrying after her. "He's a nice man. He wouldn't betray either one of us. And I just know you'll love some of the improvements he's been able to make because of the money I've given him. They've started construction on that new water well."

"I don't want to go," Anstice said stubbornly and closed the front door.

"Don't want to go where?" asked Aunt Agatha, just coming down the stairs.

Both girls jumped. "Oh, Auntie!" Anstice exclaimed. "What are you doing up?"

"Gracious, child, it's well past two and high time that I was out of bed. I understand Lord Granville was here," she said, turning to Penelope. "Most encouraging, although I ought to take the birch to you both, you naughty girls, for receiving him outside of my presence."

"He brought his sister," Penelope quickly interjected.

Their aunt harumphed. "Be that as it may, should he ever come again you're to wake me immediately. Is that understood?"

"Yes, Auntie," both girls said in unison.

Her scolding delivered, Aunt Agatha kissed them both good morning. "Come on then, let's have tea and you can tell me everything he said to you. Faith, if I don't have two nieces engaged by the end of June I shall be very much surprised!"

* * * *

"And so the plot thickens," Angel mused as the Granville carriage wound its way slowly through the heavy London traffic.

Sitting next to her with his legs crossed, idly rubbing his chin as he stared pensively out the window, muddling through his own suspicious thoughts, Niles turned to look at her. "Hm? What was that?"

"It seems so odd."

"What does?"

"They do. The way they both jumped on you, beating you with their fists and commanding you not to accompany them on their oh-so secret errand tomorrow."

"You and your dramatics," he chuckled.

"Nevertheless, one would think they were up to no good." Drawing a deep breath, Angel snuggled down in the seat next to him. She slid him a sly sideways smile.

"What?" he reluctantly asked.

"Don't you think it's time that we did something nefarious ourselves?"

"Like?"

"We could invite them to tea. And once we have the Blayne sisters safely ensconced in our sitting room, I say we drug them to the gills with laudanum and beat a confession out of them."

Niles was unamused. "You had best drop that plan, Angel, my darling if not disobedient one, or I will have the driver stop this coach long enough to relieve him of his crop and that will be, I promise you, the end of your sitting abilities for a very long, long," he gave her a dark look, "long time."

Her lips pursed. "I do have a plan B."

He only looked at her and waited.

"We could come here very early tomorrow morning in an unmarked carriage, park down the street, and then follow them whilst they go about their business. We can see firsthand what they are up to."

"Women, dogs and hickory trees," he muttered and shook his head in wry disbelief.

Flopping back against the seat, she folded her arms in a pout. "You know, sometimes I really wonder that we could have sprung from the same parents."

"At the moment, I wholeheartedly agree."

"Well, what are we going to do then?"

He looked at her, his mouth twisting wryly as he said, "In the morning, I am going to be here in an unmarked carriage with the intent of following them when they emerge to embark upon their so-called errand."

Angel instantly stopped pouting. Her face brightened in the sunniest of smiles. "We can use my coach. My driver is really very good at subterfuge and I have this wonderful black dress and veil. Very nondescript."

"You," he said pointedly, "aren't coming."

"What?! You beast! It was my plan! You can't stop me from coming!"

"If I even suspect you behind me, Angel, not only will I take a layer of hide off your backside, but the Ashford party will have been the last one that you attend this Season."

Her jaw dropped. "No! Niles, you promised! Stephen won't let me go without a chaperone and with the Season already underway, where will I find an unengaged abigail this late in the game?"

His so-what look was all the answer she got and, crestfallen, Angel slumped back in her seat. "Well, what will I be doing then?"

"You, my dear, will stay at home with your unsociable but loving husband."

"I don't like you very much."

"You can help me next time. Sometime next week I want you to invite the Misses Blayne to tea."

"Without the laudanum I suspect." Angel tsked. "All those years in the country have made you soft. Admit it, you've fallen in love with that girl. Any day now I expect to read notice of your banns in the paper."

Niles smiled, turning his head back to the window to watch the passing scenery. "I haven't fallen in love quite yet. I am merely standing upon the precipice, admiring the view."

"You'd do best to watch your step, brother dear. The fall into that particular abyss is a bloody hard one!"

* * * *

Dressed all in black with their faces veiled to foil easy recognition, Penelope and Anstice left for Braybourne Alley early the next morning. The sun, in fact, was barely up when they left their aunt's, and the sky was still stained a brilliant pink hue from the rising.

"You know," Anstice commented as their carriage pulled gently from their drive onto the public road. "I do believe this is the first time that I have ever seen the sun rise."

"It's very beautiful, isn't it?" Penelope agreed. "I like watching it come up, although I do believe it had a little more orange to it the last time." They sat for a time, marveling at nature's most colorful display, before Penelope said, "It's almost enough to inspire one to get up this early every day."

They stared at the sky a moment longer, and then turned to look at each other.

"Well," Anstice hedged. "Maybe not *every* day."

The two shared a giggle, neither one noticing as seven houses back a second unmarked coach fell into an unobtrusive pace behind them.

"What will we tell Auntie if she discovers we've borrowed her coach?" Anstice asked.

"I've got that covered," Penelope said, and opened her reticule to extract a gold necklace. "We'll say we went to get the clasp on this fixed for my visit with Granville today. After yesterday, Aunt Agatha will readily forgive me for wanting to look my best. And of course I would take you with me. I need an escort after all."

"Did you remember to bring the ring?"

Penelope dug through the reticule again. "Here it is."

She held up the tiny sapphire ring for her sister's inspection.

"How much do you think we can get for it?" Anstice asked, casting the jewelry a guilty glance.

"I don't know." Penelope turned the ring over in her hands. "Twenty, maybe twenty-five pounds."

"Is that a lot?" Anstice asked, looking dubious.

"Well, according to Mr. Hucks, there are some families in Montague Close that don't make that in a year, so I suppose it must be. Maybe it will even be enough to finish that new well they need so desperately. So, you see," Penelope said, holding the ring up to the light that filtered in through the carriage window. "All this foolishness, as you call it, is doing some good after all."

"Mm," was all Anstice said, and the rest of the ride to Braybourne Alley was made in silence.

Even knowing that her own mother would have had some difficulty in recognizing her through her full-faced veil, something still made Penelope turn around as she held open the door to Epstein's pawn shop for Anstice to precede her. She looked up and down the street, but there was only one lone carriage moving way down at the end of the street. There weren't even many people out and about yet today; only a few unfortunate ladies and some men hard at work patching the roof of a ramshackle building two tenements down.

She glanced back down the street to the carriage, but still a good block away it had already stopped its approach in front of a tavern.

A good thief, she supposed, had reason to be cautious, particularly when it came time to liquidate her purloined wares. Still, determined to stop looking over her shoulder, she went inside.

Epstein greeted her with a smile. If he wondered at receiving a second visit from her so soon after the first, then his greed at seeing the ring helped to keep his questions in check. "Lovely," he breathed as she held it out for his inspection.

Taking it from her, he turned it over in his fingers to examine the sapphire from every possible angle. He even carried it to the window to hold the ring up to the light. "I must commend you, madame. Your taste in jewelry is exquisite. The piece is small, but stunning nonetheless."

"Thank you," Penelope demured, and then hung her head. "Of course, I hate to part with it, but..."

She left the sentence hanging as she produced a handkerchief and very eloquently tucked it beneath the hem of her veil to dab at her eyes.

"Naturally I understand how distressing it is to have to attach a monetary value to something so precious as this," Epstein said soothingly, his eyes hardly leaving the ring. "If only sentiment were worth, then I could give you a fortune. But being as it is such a small ring—" his eyes glinted.

"Small, yet exquisite," Anstice reminded him.

"Oh, of course! Still," he set it down on the table. "I can only offer nine pounds."

Anstice snapped around to look at Penelope, who gasped and then began to sob in earnest. "Oh, but that is not enough!" she cried. "Surely you could spare thirty pounds at least! Certainly you could sell the ring for much more than that!"

Epstein began to squirm. "Thirty pounds? But, madame, the stone is small!"

"Come on, darling, don't cry." Anstice patted Penelope's shoulders and then reached for the ring. "We can go elsewhere."

A look that was all business snapped across Epstein's face and he lay his hand over the ring. "Now let's not be hasty. Perhaps, just this once, I can go a bit higher." He licked his lips. "Twenty-two pounds."

Penelope slowed her tears to sniffles. "Well, that will cover the immediate debts, but we still need to eat."

"Twenty-two pounds and five shillings."

"Ten," Anstice said shrewdly. "Little Robert Junior needs a new pair of shoes."

"Done," Epstein said quickly, then shook his finger at both Penelope and Anstice. "The two of you drive a very hard bargain. Shame on me for not recognizing your business sense when you first walked through my door."

Tucking her handkerchief back into her reticule, Penelope could hardly keep from smiling as he took the ring and began to count out their money. A few minutes later, the sisters emerged from the pawn shop back into the crisp light of morning with a small plump purse in one of their pockets.

"That was almost fun," Anstice giggled.

"Little Robert Junior?" Penelope laughed. "That was quick thinking."

"Yes, well, I still say we cannot continue this indefinitely," Anstice said as they walked slowly down the street towards their waiting coach.

"You'd be surprised," Penelope told her. "Most people are amazingly unobservant. So long as we are careful and don't use the same excuse too often and so long as we only take little items that are sure to go unnoticed, then we can probably do this, oh, at least a dozen times more."

"A dozen times?" Anstice cried. "Just how much do you have to steal before it is enough?"

"Hush!" Penelope whispered, glancing across the street to the unfortunates that walked along the buildings, watching them in turn. "This is hardly the time or the place to go boasting of full pockets."

She darted a quick look around, but aside from seeing a few more people out going about their day, it was still fairly early in the morning, and most of London was still asleep. Except for the rumble of an occasional hackney and the faint calls of a milkman delivering his wares, the street was still quiet.

As they were drawing near their coach, Penelope was just about to lift her veil when she spied that same coach that had earlier been parked in front of the tavern now coming up behind them. Only this time the curtains were drawn aside and she could see a very familiar face looking straight back at her.

"Oh dear heaven above!" Penelope gasped. She grabbed her sister's arm and hissed, "Don't turn around, Anstice, no matter what you do! What is it with this man? Does he have some sort of sixth sense? He catches me every time I come here!"

In a panic, Anstice glanced back over her shoulder and suddenly froze midstep right there on the street. "It's Niles?" she whispered back. "We're caught! Oh Lord, we'll be in Newgate by nightfall!"

Penelope gave her a shake. "Keep walking! There's no way he can recognize us in these heavy veils."

"Penelope Blayne, you stop right where you are!"

Penelope's shoulders drooped. "Oh, blast and bother!"

"Don't turn around!" Anstice hissed, grabbing her arm with hands that dug in like claws. "Pretend you didn't hear him!"

Unfortunately, everyone on that street couldn't have helped but heard the Earl's heavy bellow. Penelope squared

her shoulders and turned around. She glared up into Niles's dark features as his carriage drew quickly closer. "Are you following me, sir? How dare you!"

Niles's face darkened even more. "I can't believe you'd come back to this place after we've had this discussion—twice! And Anstice, you may as well stop where you are, young miss! If ever two ladies were prone to mischief when together it's the two of you!"

"As it so happens," Penelope replied tartly, "we have genuine business here."

"What business?"

"Our own and none of your concern!"

Niles drew back, almost disappearing into the dark of the curtained carriage, his jaw dropping as he stared at her.

Even Anstice gave her a shocked sidelong look.

"Penelope!" she said reprovingly.

"Well, it isn't," Penelope insisted. "We've a perfect right to go wherever we wish, and for your information we were getting a clasp fixed."

Niles turned to look back at Epstein's and his countenance darkened. "In there?" he demanded, pointing back to the dubious establishment.

"Why not?"

"Because it's a place for despots to hawk their valuables, stolen and otherwise!"

Anstice's nails dug into Penelope's arm, but she barely felt the sharp edges of them. Her face paled and she was glad of the heavy veil, which hid the telltale signs of her guilt behind a gossamer lacy barrier.

"Does your aunt know the two of you are here?" Niles didn't wait for an answer, but provided the obvious one on his own. "No, I'll bet she doesn't. No guardian in his or her right mind would allow you to within miles of this street. All right!" Signaling his driver to stop, Niles got out of the carriage.

"Come on, the both of you. Hop up! I am taking you home."

"We've got our own vehicle, if it's all the same to you!"

"It's not," he said flatly. "This is twice that man has brought you here. I am going to see the two of you promptly home, and then I'm going to have a few words with him. Hopefully, while your father sees to it that you are both nursing sore bottoms for walking about unchaperoned in this God awful part of the city!"

Anstice gasped when he took hold of her waist and lifted her up into his coach. "Sit," he told her, and she sat with all the obedience of a newly scolded puppy.

Then Niles reached for Penelope and without preamble she slapped the back of his hand. "Keep your manhandling to yourself, if you please!" she snapped irritably. Were she a woman in less control of herself, she'd have stomped her foot she was so angry that he could have caught her again. "Who do you think you are? Skulking in shadows and sneaking up on me, telling me where I can and cannot go?"

"Do that again," he told her softly, his voice dropping to the low, growling tones, "and I will turn you across my knee here in the street."

Hands on her hips, she lifted her chin and glared right back. "Not even you would do such a barbaric thing in public!"

"Oh really?" Niles took hold of her right arm and, before she could even react, had his foot propped up on the carriage step and one very shocked Miss Penelope Blayne draped across his thigh.

"Oh!" she cried, every ounce of haughtiness fleeing her tone upon a wave of sudden concern for her personal well-being. "Put me down! You overbearing—OH!"

His palm cracked hard across the seat of her skirts. Though her skirts did much to soften the blow, the force of the impact was such that she nearly jerked all the way up and off his knee. An arm like a steel band around her waist kept her firmly pinned into place.

"Oh!" she beat her fists against his leg in futile protest. His hand had definitely not softened any since that last time she'd found herself in this humiliating position.

Anstice shot to her feet in the hack, echoing Penelope's cry with a much louder one of her own. "Oh, my goodness!"

"Sit down!" Niles told her. "Or it will be you I take across my knee next!"

Anstice rocked the entire conveyance with the force of her obedient sitting.

Penelope kicked her feet when his palm smacked down across her upturned rump a second and then third time. Her cheeks flushed a hot shade of red as she heard a distant chuckle. She didn't know who was watching, but the idea that anyone would be so crass as to glean enjoyment from her disgrace was enough to rekindle her temper. She grit her teeth, her whole body jolting as Niles spanked her yet again, hard enough this time to leave her bottom stinging despite

the layers of her dress, and then it was over. He set her on her feet. Hands on his narrow hips, he watched her struggle to keep both her temper under control and her hands from ducking behind her to assuage her martyred bottom.

"Well, my naughty young miss," he said, a corner of his mouth twitching triumphantly upward. "Are there any other dares to which you'd like to challenge me?"

Penelope clutched her hands in her skirts and glared at him. If only looks could strike a man dead, then she would be avenged.

"I," she seethed huskily, "am not your miss, naughty or otherwise. I am not your anything! And that waltz I promised to save for you at the Howell's party, well, you can just forget that! In fact, you can forget ever dancing with me again! I will be dead and in my grave before I allow you to lay so much as one finger of one hand anywhere upon my person! And further more, I—"

Niles leaned forward and kissed her on the tip of her nose.

Penelope shut her mouth with an audible clacking of teeth and blinked at him in utter amazement.

"You're absolutely darling when vexed," he said, and picked her up by the waist to deposit her alongside her sister in the back of the coach. "Let's take the ladies home, Brady," he called to his driver as he climbed up to sit beside her. Closing the door, the entire carriage rocked as Brady snapped the reins and the horses began to move.

Recovering her anger if not her voice, Penelope all but squished her little sister against the other wall and window in her effort not to touch Niles at all.

"I say," Anstice wheezed as the conveyance turned a street corner. "Move over, Penelope. I can barely breathe."

"At least you weren't spanked on a public street," Penelope snipped, glaring balefully at Niles, though he pretended not to see it.

"I didn't swat his hand, either," Anstice snipped back.

"No, you Judas, you jumped to do his bidding like an overeager lapdog!"

Anstice dropped her jaw, her eyes widening both with anger and hurt. "You just see if I ever come here with you again, Penelope, you—you—"

"You are both of you forgetting that my driver is in possession of a riding whip, one which I can easily borrow," Niles interrupted. "I am not going to listen to this bickering the whole way home, so hush."

Neither woman said anything after that, but the minute the coach pulled up to Aunt Agatha's front door, Anstice jumped down without waiting for any assistance at all and ran inside. Penelope wasted little time in following suit, but as she gathered her skirts to climb down out of the coach, Niles caught her arm.

"Oh no you don't," he said darkly. "We are still going to talk about this."

"That's what you think! I have said all I intend to to you!" Penelope pulled at her imprisoned arm, but he didn't let go. He didn't even loosen his grip. "You, sir, are a beast and a cad! And I, for one, want nothing more to do with the likes of you!"

"Is that so?"

She gave a vicious yank to her arm just as he was reaching for her with his other hand and broke free so suddenly that she fell backwards out of the carriage. She picked herself up off the ground, dusting her skirts off with angry slaps of both hands and knocked her veil out of her face so she could glare at him directly. "You did that on purpose!" she accused.

Although still angry himself, Niles asked, "Are you all right?"

"Don't you worry yourself over me, you wasted lump of human flesh in the guise of a gentleman! Every single time I find myself thrown into your beastly company I wind up unable to sit down. I pity the poor girl destined to become your wife. She'll be doomed to spend the entire rest of her life counting knotholes in the floor!"

His mouth thinned into a hard line of disapproval. "If that woman is anything like you, she'll deserve every bit of it."

"Cad!" she snarled, and turned and stopped towards the house. "I want nothing more to do with you. Not now or ever again! Our association is through!"

As she stomped angrily up the steps, she heard the unmistakable sound of boots crunching in the gravel after her and closing the distance fast. When Niles grabbed her arm, she swung around, ready to blister his ears with another insult-ridden tirade. But suddenly her world turned upside down as he ducked down to toss her over his shoulder.

"No! You can't do this to me again! I won't let you!" She kicked her feet and smacked his back with her fists. "Put me down this minute! I said I've done with you and I mean it!"

"Oh, but I am far from done with you," he announced, marching up the remaining steps and through the open door behind held by the butler, Graves.

"Put me down!" Penelope shrieked.

Niles ignored her and, addressing Graves, said, "Kindly inform Lady Wainwright that the Earl of Aylesford has her niece in the study, skirts up and knickers down for the spanking of her life! If Madame has any intention of chaperoning the event then she had best hurry herself out of bed because I'm not going to wait!"

And with that, he carried the squealing, kicking and flailing Penelope into the study and slammed the door behind him.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

Penelope stood with her nose to the corner and glared at the wall. She had never been so humiliated in all her life. Admittedly, hers was still considered a young one, but that didn't make the embarrassment of her situation any easier to bear. Her skirts were pinned to her shoulders and she had to hold her multitude of petticoats up around her waist with both hands. If she let them drop so much as an inch, Niles and his evil eye took note of it and her embarrassment would increase tenfold as he drawled out the arrogant command, "Get them up again, Penny my love."

She couldn't wait to get out of this corner and then she'd 'Penny my love' him!

For now, however, it was everything that she could do to remain in position, her nose tucked securely to the join of the walls, unable to spare so much as a finger to rub the aching of her hot bottom. At least not, she thought balefully, if she wanted to avoid another trip across his ever ready knee.

She turned her head slightly, giving Niles a scathing glare. But he was watching. And even worse, so was her aunt.

The old woman sat upon the settee, dressed in only her nightgown and morning robe, her hair still braided and her sleeping cap still pinned into place. Though she tried to busy herself by constantly stirring her tea, her face was as bright red as Penelope's nether cheeks. Most likely wishing herself somewhere—anywhere—other than here, ever the mindful

hostess, she still tried her best to spark some pleasant conversation.

"It certainly is good to see you again, Lord Granville." She cleared her throat, the blush on her cheeks heightening as she said, "Although I honestly had hoped our next meeting would be under, ah.... different circumstances."

"As had I," Niles admitted. "But fate has dictated otherwise, I'm afraid. Your niece has a penchant for rebellion that could definitely do with a bit of minding. With any luck, however, I think I have finally impressed upon her the folly of continuing to visit improper places."

"It's a good thing you were there to see my girls home again. Braybourne Alley." She shook her head ruefully.

"Penelope, dear, what were you thinking?"

"I was getting a clasp fixed," Penelope said through gritted teeth.

"But Braybourne Alley?" her aunt asked.

"There are other places to fix a broken clasp than that section of town, particularly when you and I have already discussed this very subject before."

"I like Mr. Epstein," she snapped. "You presume a lot when you presume to tell me where I can and cannot go!"

"Watch your tone," Niles told her. "Nose back to the wall, too. I haven't said you could come out yet."

Penelope bent back over and pressed her nose to the corner. She didn't say so much as a single one of the acidic retorts that leapt to her tongue ... but, boy, did she think them!

Aunt Agatha took pity on her. "Surely she may come out now, don't you think? It's been a full ten minutes."

Niles took his watch from his vest pocket. "She has another five minutes," he said, clicking the watch smartly shut again.

"Gracious, you are very stern!" Aunt Agatha said, shaking her head and glancing only briefly at Penelope's stiff back. "But maybe that's what she needs. Of my nieces, Penelope has always been the wild and fearless one. It has always been her way to act first and think of consequences later. I dread to think what might have happened if you had not spied the girls when you did."

"We'd have arrived home a great deal less molested," Penelope muttered darkly, glaring at the wallpapered flower nestled just beneath the tip of her nose.

"What was that?" Niles inquired.

Penelope glared at the wall, but said nothing more. She wasn't that brave. Not with her bottom still smarting and burning the way it was.

She heard the soft rustle of clothes as Niles stood up and strolled across the room to join her in the corner. He leaned his forearm against the wall, so close that there was barely enough space between them for empty air.

"What did you say?" he asked again, his tone painstakingly soft and seemingly mild.

She wasn't at all fooled and meekly ducked her head. "Nothing."

"Look at me."

The room suddenly fell unnaturally quiet. She could hear the metronomic tick-tock of the mantelpiece clock and soft footsteps in the hall outside the study. With no other choice really, Penelope turned around. Her bottom clenched, and against her will, she lowered her hands, dropping the ruffles of her petticoats, a woefully inadequate shield, back down over her blushing buttocks as if that alone could hide her flanks from further abuse. She raised her eyes to his, halfway afraid that he would make good his threat and start her punishment, beginning with the spanking, all over again.

"What did you say, Penny my darling?" he softly repeated.

Her breath caught in the back of her throat. Why oh why couldn't she learn to mind her tongue? Swallowing hard, fairly certain that she had sealed her fate for another dose of his iron-hard hand, Penelope mumbled, "I said if you hadn't found us, we'd have found our way home unmolested."

Niles smiled. "You might have. Or, like your first foray into that slum, you might have run into trouble. But this time, you would have had your little sister in tow."

Her lips parted as she, thinking of Anstice having to face down the same men who had chased her into that pub all those weeks before, dropped her eyes from his to the floor.

"Thank you for being honest," Niles told her and dropped a kiss onto the tip of her nose. "You may put down your skirts and come out of the corner now." And then he returned to his tea, leaving her to gape after him in open mouthed astonishment.

"Well," Aunt Agatha laughed. "Come sit next to me." She patted the settee cushions next to her. "I'll fix you up a nice

spot of tea, and we can entertain your guest together. Tell me, my lord, what is your interest in our sweet Penelope."

"He has none," Penelope said through gritted teeth. She ducked down to catch her knickers and jerked them back up into place. Her temper flared with the aching heat of her bottom as she struggled to tie the strings and then dropped her petticoats down to hide her frilly underwear from public sight. Her face felt as hot as her nether cheeks as she faced down both her aunt and the earl; her voice trembled with embarrassed fury. "And I have no interest in him, either. And if Granville is to be the end all be all of my possibilities, then I would rather finish out my life as an old and unwedded spinster!"

Aunt Agatha looked first shocked, and then horribly embarrassed. "Oh no, don't say that!" she said, half laughing as she took a quick peek at Nile's face, grim and frowning as he was.

But Penelope could have cared less. She snapped around, stalking angrily from the room. Lifting her skirts, she ran up the stairs and slammed her bedroom door shut behind her. She flung herself face down on her bed, punching her pillow twice before hugging it fiercely to her chest, and fumed.

A few moments later her door opened without a knock.

"Go away," Penelope said petulantly. "I want to be alone."

"Too bad," Niles replied.

Penelope rolled over without thinking, although the instant her smarting bottom touched the mattress, she hissed a sharp breath and got back on her stomach. Quickly squirming

off the bed, she stood up stiff with outrage. "You can't be in here!" She pointed back out at the hall. "Get out!"

Niles shut the door instead. "You are acting like a spoiled and willful brat."

"Better a brat," she hotly declared, "than a—a—"

Her eyes flashed, as he held up a cautioning finger. "Be very careful, Penny."

"Bastard," she hissed.

He lowered his head, his expression turning very grin indeed. "All right, now you've had your say; I'll tolerate no more of this behavior. You are going to go back downstairs. You are going to apologize to your aunt, who is right now beside herself with tears. You are going to thank her for all of her hard efforts to make the Season for you and your sister a smashing success. And then instead of acting like a spoiled and petulant child, you will hug her and kiss her on the cheek, and agree to come with me on the date to which we are already—" he withdrew his pocket watch and glanced at the time, "seventeen minutes late."

Grinding her fists into her hips, she narrowed her eyes. "Get. Stuffed."

It was, perhaps, not the wisest thing she could have said. Particularly not to a man who had already spanked her, not just once, but four times now—twice today alone!

She started to step back when he reached for her, but he was quicker. Niles caught her by the shoulders and kissed her, unexpectedly hard.

"I like the fire," he said, giving her a stern shake. "But I know that somewhere inside of you, there is a very sweet

young woman, dying to get out. Perhaps one of these days, you'll let her."

And then he picked her up, lifting her all the way off the floor while he sat down on the edge of her bed and dumping her over his lap.

"No!" she gasped, horrified. He got her right hand, though she squirmed like a dervish, and pinned it behind her back. "Don't you dare! Don't you dare!"

But the problem was that he was daring just fine.

Niles scissored his legs and managed, despite her desperate kicking and squirming, to clamp one behind both her knees, instantly muting her struggles and dampening her ability to get away. Though that certainly didn't stop her from expending considerable energy and at least one full and futile minute in trying.

And while she fought her way into exhaustion, Niles was doggedly working to yank her skirts and petticoats back up over her hips. For the second time in the same day, he feasted his eyes on her knicker-clad bottom.

Trapped, unable to squirm free, Penelope slumped over his lap and tried to catch her breath. She shook her head. "If you do this, I will hate you for the rest of my life!"

"I sincerely hope not," Niles replied, taking hold of the back of her knickers.

Penelope died, or at least she tried to. She closed her eyes, her face reddening as he peeled the thin fabric as far down her legs as his own entrapping ones would allow, and waited for the inevitable, agonizing, painful, humiliating smacks to follow. She made a small sound in the back of her

throat as Niles laid his bare hand on her equally bare and cringing bottom.

He neither groped her, nor fondled, nor even rubbed. He merely lay his palm across the lowermost swell of her right bottom cheek and kept it there, warm and firmly in her mind and impossible to ignore.

"Now," he said again, in a smooth and conversational tone. "I would like for you to go downstairs, thank your aunt and kiss her cheek, apologize for your behavior, and then we shall be off on our drive."

Feeling utterly defeated and even a little ashamed for having made her aunt cry, Penelope bowed her head. Tears filled her eyes. "All right," she whispered.

Taking his hand off her bottom, Niles let her go. Penelope climbed slowly off his knee, backing as far across the room as the opposing wall would allow her. Her knickers were still around her ankles, but she was too embarrassed to bend down and pull them back into place with him sitting right there, watching her. Chest heaving, her hands frantically brushed down her skirts as if by brushing the touch of him from her tingling skin she could erase the time spent across his knee from reality.

"I will give you three minutes to set yourself back to rights," Niles said as he stood up. But instead of heading for the door, he came to her first. The wall prevented her from retreating even one step further when he reached for her, hooking his finger beneath her chin and tilting her face up to his. "Bring a shawl," he told her, his eyes warming in a way that made her stomach do the same. His handsome mouth

smiled and her hands balled into fists in her skirts; she hated the way her heart responded, beating faster, a swell of longing rising inside her, begging her either to lean forward so she could feel the touch of his mouth on hers ... or to hit him right in his arrogant nose!

He lowered his head and Penelope felt her already traitorous heart skip a beat. At the last minute, she quickly turned her face aside before he could kiss her, but Niles promptly turned her back again. His warm lips found hers without the slightest qualm and positively stole her breath right out of her lungs.

Kisses from domineering, woman-brutalizing beasts couldn't affect her one bit, she told herself, but her knees weakened and her fists tightened in the folds of her skirts. All the way down in her shoes, her toes were curling.

"Do you still hate me?" Niles softly asked, his mouth ever so gently stealing kiss after soft, sweet kiss from trembling lips.

"Yes," she whispered.

He laughed knowingly, bending his forehead to her own, cupping her face in the palms of his hands as he whispered back, "My darling Penny, liars get spanked."

* * * *

The morning clouds had burned off and the sun was casting warming rays across their shoulders and drying the dew on the grass in Hyde Park. There were ducks on the pond and in the fountains and at least a dozen other young bucks were touring the grounds, paying their court to this Season's

ladies of choice or matching skill and playful banter on the tennis courts. Some were strolling side-by-side, some were sitting on park benches or riding their horses sedately along the proper paths. Only two others were in the fashionable new two-person curricles, like the Earl's, which had made just about everybody's top most wanted list this year. Lord Granville's won the distinction of being the most colorful. It was pristine white, trimmed in yellow with bright orange seats. Dressed in blue herself, Penelope was sure she clashed with the color scheme, but regardless, they drew many a gaze as they made their rounds through the park.

"Are you going to stay mad at me all day?" Niles asked.

"I doubt it." She turned her head to watch the ducks bathing in the fountain. "I believe we are only scheduled to remain together another hour. A few minutes beyond our parting, by then I'm sure I'll have run all thoughts of you completely from my mind."

"Petulance does not become you, dear Penny."

"It's Penelope, and how should you know that? Have you suddenly become an authority on all things me? For all you know, it becomes me to a T."

"But that's the point of this little tete-e-tete," Niles said. "To get to know one another well enough to suit. To see if we can't stand the test of time, marriage and one another until death do we part."

"We can't," Penelope said simply. "We can't stay in one another's company without my getting irritated with you and you getting barbarically physical with me. Our's is a

relationship doomed to misery. Stand the test of time? Ha! We can barely stand each other."

"I think I can stand you quite nicely," Niles teased. "And if I may be allowed to point out, standing is the one thing I'm certain you shall be doing a lot of, so I don't understand your objections." Penelope gave him a dry look, and he relented. "All right, I apologize. That was a crass thing for a gentleman to say."

"It certainly was."

"Come, come, Penny my love. Let me see you smile. Forgiveness is divine, you know. And I did give you a pillow to sit upon, so you can't say that I'm completely callous where your comfort is concerned."

"Ha!" The quick bark of cynical laughter was out before she could catch herself.

"Come on." He nudged her with his elbow. "Can't you say something nice to me?"

Her bottom smarting even with the pillow, Penelope made a slight face as she shifted next to him. "You have very pretty horses," she finally offered.

Though undoubtedly not what he had in mind, Niles graciously said, "Thank you. They are beautiful, albeit utterly useless for anything other than showing off."

"Not so," she argued. "I assume they are thoroughbreds. They certainly look as if they are descended from Arabian stock."

He looked at her sideways. "They are."

"Of whom do they descend: the Byerly Turk, the Darley Arabian or the Godolphin Arabian? My guess would be the Darley

Arabian, although most likely not through the Childers' line. And I doubt you plan to race them if you're using them for carriage stock now. Or are you simply showing them off for me?"

"Good heavens," Niles said, pleasantly stunned. "The next time I go for cattle, I know who I should bring with me. Where in the world did you learn about horses?"

Penelope tried not to feel so pleased by his compliment, but some of her bad humor slipped away anyway and she preened a bit under his admiration. "My father. He never could quite get over the nerve of my not being born a boy."

"You'll have to pardon me if I'm rather grateful for that," Niles laughed. He smiled and nodded to an acquaintance he knew as they passed him. "I sincerely doubt we'd be riding through the park together if you had been."

Penelope frowned. "I should also doubt you'd have smacked my bottom so soundly or so often had I been born to wear breeches instead of skirts."

Niles deftly steered the conversation back into calmer waters. "I understand your family has an estate out in Berkshire."

"Yes, we home there over the winters."

"That's as far removed as my own Bramblewood in Humberside. How do you like it?"

"Oh, I love it," Penelope said honestly, a little more of her disgruntlement fleeing in the wake of a spark of interest for the conversation. "It's quiet and peaceful. We have a huge and well stocked library—"

He looked at her in surprise. "A library? Really?"

"Yes. So now you know," Penelope told him, lifting her chin proudly. "I'm a blue-stocking and proud of it. I love to read. The older the books and the more of them there are, then the better I like it."

"Nothing wrong with that," Niles said, grateful that he wouldn't have to hide his own predilection for the same past time. "And that would certainly explain why you have such an interest in how the 'other side' lives."

"Oh?" It took her a moment to figure out to what he was referring. "Oh! You mean 'carousing'? Yes, you're right. Absolutely. That's it in a nutshell. I wish to be more like a man because I read." She rolled her eyes and, staring out across the manicured lawn, shook her head.

"And you know a surprising lot about horse flesh." He smiled over the reins, competently steering the horses around the park's extensive rose gardens. "So tell me, what other accomplishments do you boast?"

Penelope looked at him, a corner of her mouth turning wryly upwards. "Truthfully?"

"I do prefer truth over the alternative, yes."

"I can't think of a single thing. Not unlike my father, I am a rather useless thing."

Niles did not echo her smile, but instead said, "Do you like that pillow you're sitting on? And would you like to be sitting on it a few days longer?"

Penelope startled. "What have I done now?"

"You are never repeat a sentiment like that again, particularly not within my hearing, do you understand? You are not useless."

"I only meant—"

"I know what you meant," Niles cut in sternly.

"Nonetheless, I will not tolerate its being said. Besides, with a little consideration, I'm certain I could come up with at least one good talent to which you excel."

Still smarting from his newest threat to her person, Penelope folded her hands in her lap and sat back in the curricule to watch him. "Guess away, Sir Brute. If you happen to mention something, I'll be sure to let you know. I'll be stunned, without doubt, but I promise to speak up immediately."

Niles gave her a sideways look, his smile slightly returning although he let the mild insult slide. Instead, he rose to the challenge and pulled the horses to a stop beneath the fluttering leaves of a drooping willow. "You have a beautiful voice. I'll bet you can sing."

She nodded. "I know the words to a good many songs, but sadly any melody that falls from my mouth is butchered most horribly. Like the screeching of a cat with a stepped upon tail." She pointed to her ear. "I happen to be quite tone deaf."

A quick smile flashed across his face. "Well, that takes care of my next guess; that you might play an instrument."

"I had a music teacher try for seven years to teach me the violin and flute. Fortunately he was a stubborn man rather than a cruel one or I should likely have lived out my childhood with smartly rapped knuckles."

Chuckling, Niles said, "Can you paint?"

"Nope," she chirped, letting the playfulness of the moment coax her out of her sulking.

"Can you draw? Watercolors? Charcoal sketches?"

"I've always wished I could, but I lack the skill."

"Needlework?"

Penelope shuddered. "I detest it."

Niles leaned over, forearms braced upon his knees. His eyebrows quirked together as he regarded her. "Then how, aside from reading, do you occupy your time in the country?"

"Aside from the library, there's the local hunt, some small charities to perform in town, and sometimes I manage to pull Papa from his rocks long enough for a rousing game of chess."

"Chess?!" Niles exclaimed, laughing. "There go those manly tendencies again."

"I enjoy the game!" Penelope declared with mock affront. "I happen to be very good at it, as well. I excel at plotting strategies. If that's what you consider manly, then I suppose I'd rather not be a lady."

"Pity, since you make such a lovely one."

"Lovely or not, you can't deny that men have infinitely more fun than women."

"Ah, yes," Niles drawled. "Our carousing ways."

"You certainly have more freedom."

"Only because we, as a gender, aren't anywhere near as valuable as the fairer set."

Now it was Penelope's turn to laugh, her eyes wide with both surprise and even a glimmer of delight. "Nicely said, I must confess."

"Well, I'm not a complete social clod. At least not all the time. Besides, aside from carousing in the foulest sections of

town, what pray tell could you accomplish as a man that you could not do equally as well being the lady that you are?"

Penelope pursed her lips, thinking. "I can't battle ruffians with my trusty sword."

"What?" Niles accidentally dropped his reins. He tossed back his head, roaring with laughter.

"I've amused you!" Penelope said.

"You are without a doubt the most original lady I've ever known." Niles chuckled, wiping his eyes on his sleeve.

"It's not originality," she declared. "It's common sense."

"Oh?"

"Think about it. If every time you tried to spank me you knew you'd first have to face down my quick and daring nubile blade, you'd think twice about it, wouldn't you?"

Niles couldn't help it, he began to laugh all over again.

"Well, wouldn't you?" she insisted, giggling a little herself.

"Absolutely," he agreed, shaking his head. "Penny, my dear, you truly are a delight."

For once, she didn't even correct his misuse of her name. "It must be all this fresh air. I'm sure when next you see me, I'll once again be as ordinary and unassuming as a glass of water."

"I sincerely hope not," Niles said, shaking his head and turning the horses back.

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CHAPTER NINE

Every window in the Howell's three-story town home was brightly lit, and one could hear the music from the orchestra a full block before the house even came into view.

"I want smiles and charm tonight," Aunt Agatha told her nieces. "Anstice, you are to give Lord Wentworth no more than two dances."

"Oh, but Auntie," Anstice begged. "He wants them all!"

"All of them? Certainly not! Imagine what people would say if I allowed that."

"It is a party," Penelope interrupted for her sister, who sagged crestfallen on the seat across from her.

Aunt Agatha softened. "Very well." She folded her hands over her reticule. "I am not so old that I cannot remember my own courting days. All right. You may have three with your Lord Wentworth. But no more than that!" she ordered, her voice rising to be heard over Anstice's excited squeal. Agatha rounded on Penelope, saying, "And you, young lady. Don't think I'm going to forget about you. You're well enough to come tonight, so you are well enough to dance with Lord Granville." She held up her fingers. "Three dances. And you're to be polite and winsome for all three!"

Penelope made a slight face, but it was more for appearances and she quickly had to turn her face to the window lest her excitement show in her eyes. Lord Niles Granville was an arrogant, insufferable, hard-headed, hard-

handed brute, but the thought of sharing a dance with him still made her heart flutter.

"I meant it, young lady," her aunt stated, rapping Penelope's wrist lightly with her fan. "If you pull your shenanigans tonight just to avoid having to dance with that Earl of yours, I'll not only invite him home with us afterwards, but I'll provide him with a stout rod to thrash you with."

Penelope started. "Aunt Agatha!"

"And no dancing with that peacock Reeves until you have fulfilled at least one of your obligations with Lord Granville."

"Rupert is a very nice man. I don't know why you so dislike him."

"It has nothing to do with likes or dislikes. He hasn't two pennies to rub together. Why waste your time on a pauper when you can have an Earl? Especially one as smitten with you as Lord Granville certainly seems to be."

"The pauper is nowhere near as over domineering as Ni—I mean, Granville."

"Maybe you need over-domineering," her aunt sniffed. "I think the Earl is good for you. A strong man for a strong-willed woman. Now that's a match to be proud of."

Anstice stepped on Penelope's foot. Hard. It was a good thing that their carriage arrived at the Howell's then, otherwise Penelope's mouth might have got the best of her.

It took a good half an hour once they had reached the party to disembark their carriage, and while they sat waiting in line, Penelope watched out the window for people she knew. For no reason in particular, she told herself. She just wanted to know who was here.

But there was no denying how her eyes lit up when she saw Angel's coach pulling up to the steps. Penelope was still a fair distance away, but even in the dark of night, she recognized Nile's tall form as he climbed down from the carriage and then held out his hand for his sister. She even caught her breath when Niles turned his head to look down the line of coaches behind his. Penelope knew the exact moment when he saw her, or at least the moment when he recognized her aunt's carriage: he smiled.

Penelope felt the warmth of that smile all the way down to her toes. It took real effort to keep from doing something silly, like sticking her hand out the window and waving at him as he and Angel walked up the front steps together. But there they separated. Niles kissed Angel's cheek and then sent her on inside while he remained at the top of the stairs, leaning his broad shoulders against a tall spiraled pillar while he waited for the line of carriages to move on.

With each group that disembarked, Penelope's drew closer to the stairs and to Niles, who continued to wait with the patience of a saint, sometimes greeting those he knew as they entered the Howell's town residence, but for the most part simply watching her progress and smiling.

"There's the Wentworths," Penelope said and nearly lost her position at the window as Anstice pushed her aside to look.

"Where?" She caught her breath when she spotted him, accompanied by both parents. He, too, looked down the line of waiting carriages. The Wainwright coach was still four vehicles down the line, and one problem with having a

socially-acceptable-minded mama was that spontaneous gallantry was not allowed. Unlike Niles, the young Lord Wentworth was not permitted to wait for Anstice on the porch 'like a livery boy'.

"You'll see him soon enough," Aunt Agatha said, soothing her youngest niece's disappointment. "Good heavens, girls these days are too eager. There's a difference between making one's self available for an appropriate match and desperation. Be very careful, my dear Anstice, that you don't make yourself appear to be the latter."

Shortly afterward they pulled up to the stairs and, desperate or not, Anstice was still the first one out. Penelope didn't realize how spry her aunt really was, but she was out on the sidewalk after Anstice in a flash, planting herself firmly on the hem of her niece's gown.

"Wait for everyone," their aunt said dryly.

When it came Penelope's turn to step down, she held out her hand to take the valet's but it was Nile's hand she found her own cupped by.

"I have come to collect my waltz," he told her, smiling up into her eyes.

Trust Aunt Agatha to keep a sharp and proprietary mind about her. "Not from the street, you don't!"

Niles never took his eyes off Penelope's. He smiled. "Of course, not from the street."

Penelope didn't believe him for a second. Had Aunt Agatha not been so quick on her toes, she had no doubt in her mind that they would right now, in all likelihood, be dancing on the

front steps in front of everyone. She blushed, embarrassed by the thought, but not entirely displeased.

"This is really improper of you," Aunt Agatha told him. "But since you've already been seen by everyone, we may as well go inside." She held out her hand.

"It would be my pleasure to escort you all inside," Niles said, laying Penelope's hand upon one arm and offering Aunt Agatha the other. His eyes warmed when he looked down at Penelope. "You look very beautiful tonight."

"Thank you." Penelope blushed and preened as they climbed the steps and went inside. Tonight had been the first time since her coming out that she had put some serious effort into her appearance at one of these functions. Her ivy-green gown was both high-waisted and low-collared, revealing an ample amount of cleavage and made of a fabric so gossamer as to make it nearly transparent. An attentive eye could easily catch tantalizing peaks of her silver underskirts as she passed into the well-lit ballroom.

And Niles was nothing tonight if not attentive. No sooner had they entered the ballroom than did he murmur close to her ear, "Now, about those waltzes I was promised."

"Waltzes," Penelope said, hiding her pleasure behind a look of surprise. "Plural? I do believe I promised you only the one."

"And I was assured of three," Aunt Agatha interrupted. She let go of Niles' arm, and gave him a stern look. "Three is all there shall be. My nieces are good girls, and I'll not have any whisperings going on behind my back."

"Three dances in company as charming as my darling Penny's will pass like the blinking of an eye," Niles declared. "Surely I am entitled to one or two more."

"Oh?" Aunt Agatha rounded on him, her blue eyes widening with exaggerated innocence. "I was unaware that you had laid an offer upon the table, Lord Granville."

"Ah," he hedged, his gaze darting from Agatha to Penelope, who smiled at him, her eyes also widening. With the jaws of the marriage trap beginning to snap shut around him, Niles took the instinctual bachelor's way out. "Would you like some punch?"

"Please." Penelope took her hand from his arm and let him beat a hasty retreat across the room to the punch bowl, which Mr. Stawel was already attempting to drain dry.

"Well done," Aunt Agatha murmured, a small smile turning the corners of her lips. "You'll have that one chasing you until you catch him."

"If you haven't frightened him off," Penelope replied.

"Nonsense. He'll retreat far enough to regroup his courage, and then he'll come scampering back for another go. That's the way of men. Trust your old auntie, girl."

Lord Wentworth appeared a bare second later to beg Anstice's hand and pulled her off to visit with his parents before the dancing started, and as she watched them go, Aunt Agatha suddenly perked.

"Oh, there is that boastful Lady Walhalm. She's so proud, her daughter caught the attentions of a baron. Well!" Aunt Agatha gathered her skirts. "Wait until she hears about the

conquests of my girls!" She swept across the room to join her circles of cronies.

Although the journey to the punch bowl and the line waiting there were both long ones, Penelope wasn't by herself for very long. Rupert Reeves came up the front steps with Anne Ashford on his arm. "My dear, Miss Blayne! Have you been left here alone?"

Penelope greeted her friends with smiles. "Only for the moment. I am safely tucked into Lord Granville's company. He is over by the punch. How are you both this evening? Miss Ashford, what a beautiful dress!"

Delighted, Anne turned in a circle to show off her gown. "Do you like it? I was forever at Madame Balfree's being pinned and poked."

"It's very becoming," Penelope declared.

"She would be becoming in anything she wore," Reeves added, smiling down at Anne as she took his arm again.. There was a sparkle of love in his eyes, a look which she so obviously returned.

"I see," Penelope softly said.

"Would you do us a favor?"

"If I can."

"Miss Ashford's mama is watching us rather closely."

"She protests when we spend too much time in one another's company," Anne added.

"Could you spare one or two dances tonight? It would please Lady Ashford no end to see us apart once in a while."

"As if you need to ask," Penelope told them, her gaze steeling toward the refreshments line and Granville, who was

watching her back. He smiled. "Of course I will. Whenever you need me."

"How about now?" Reeves asked, beaming as the first strains of music began a fresh minuet.

Penelope glanced over at Niles, but he was still waiting in line. "All right." She stepped down to take Anne's place on his arm. "Help yourself to my punch," she said. "Should his lordship ever return with it."

Anne giggled and waved them off.

Unfortunately, Niles' dusty country manners really showed through when, halfway through the dance, instead of standing patiently on the sidelines until she was again free, he abandoned his punch cups and somehow joined in. He did it so smoothly that Penelope didn't realize what had happened until, as she completed one minuet turn, she came face to face with Niles instead of Reeves.

"Oh good heavens!" she heard Rupert saying from somewhere behind her. "Well ... hello there."

"Hello," Janine Merriweather giggled.

Penelope's eyes drooped half-closed and she met Niles' smile with a dry one of her own. "Shame on you," she told him.

"I know." He didn't look in the slightest bit ashamed, however. "But you really have no idea what it does to me to see you dancing in the arms of another man."

"We are hardly in one another's arms, sir. This is a minuet, not a waltz." They both turned to dance a pass around one another and she called teasingly back over her shoulder to him, "That won't be until later."

"Are you trying to make me jealous?" Niles asked.

"Is it working?"

They faced one another again. "I don't think you're going to make your next dance with Mr. Reeves. Or anyone else for that matter."

"My aunt will not be very pleased."

"I am not wooing your aunt."

"I'm not really sure you're wooing me, for that matter. You just like to follow me from place to place and vent your strong-armed predilections upon my person."

He arched both eyebrows. "I think I have done just about everything possible to prove my interest, predilections notwithstanding, except perhaps to make a formal declaration." They passed one another again. "Which, I suppose, brings us to the hypothetical question: what would be your honest response should I approach your father regarding a future together?"

"I don't think my father would be interested. He is still grieving over my mother."

Niles gave her an arched look. "I meant in regards to you, and you may thank whatever guardian angel sits upon your shoulder that this is a crowded room."

"That's right, propose to me in one breath and threaten bodily harm in the next."

"After a comment like that, I am more than justified. Now answer the question."

"You mean am I worn down enough by your rough country charm to accept your proposal?"

"I am not too proud to mention what a good match I'd be," Niles pointed out. "Marriage to me would bring financial stability to your family, guarantee a good match for your sister, and you would gain a title, not just for yourself but for your children. Spinsterhood is not a life for you, my darling. Nor does perpetual widowhood suit me. I would much rather prefer to gain a mentally and, dare I say, physically stimulating wife and life-long companion. Such a partnership between us means everybody wins."

"You make a compelling argument," Penelope acknowledged, trying not to be too excited. After all, words of engagement on a dance floor did not a marriage make.

"You haven't heard the best part yet."

"There's a best part to this?" she asked, feigning wide-eyed innocence to soften her vaguely insulting teasing.

"Absolutely. Not only would you get me, with all my charm, good looks—"

"Strange obsessions over bright red female bottoms," she interjected.

"But you would also gain access to my—" he lowered his tone meaningfully as, following the dance, they stepped in close to one another, "—chess board."

"Be still my beating heart," Penelope laughed.

"And that's not all." He held up a staying finger. "I will teach you how to fence."

Penelope almost missed a step, and she looked at him in absolute amazement. "You'll what?"

"I will give you a daring and nubile blade and teach you how to wield it."

"Would that not be self defeating?" she couldn't help but ask.

"I'm willing to take that risk," he said with a smile.
"Anything for my darling Penny's happiness."

The dinner bell rang, and thank goodness that it did. Otherwise Penelope might have forgotten herself completely and simply agreed right then and there without waiting for her father's consent; she was that flattered.

Although he wasn't assigned to the chair beside hers, Niles accompanied Penelope into the dining hall and very calmly, matter-of-factly, changed Lady Howell's seating arrangements. As he swapped his name card with the Season's most renowned fortune hunter, he asked, "You didn't have a burning desire to converse with Stawel, did you?"

Penelope hadn't missed anything to do with Stawel since the night he had so rudely left her standing on the dance floor without a partner to finish out the steps. Still, she couldn't help but tease, "Actually, I was rather looking forward to comparing techniques."

"You don't need to, darling. You've already bagged your fortune."

Penelope looked away. "I do not talk to you because of your money, you know. I would dislike you just as intently without it." She used a smile to assuage any hurt inflicted by her verbal jab. "Besides, until we are formally engaged, I don't think we should continue to talk about this."

"What do you think this is if not a formal engagement?"

"Men will say whatever they think will gain them a clandestine rendezvous in the garden or help them steal a willing kiss in a shadowy alcove somewhere away from prying eyes." Penelope turned her head to see Aunt Agatha frowning at them from the other side of the long dining table. "Oh dear. We've been spotted. Perhaps you should bypass my father and go straight to my aunt for permission. Or should I have waited until after we'd wed to insinuate that in my family it's the women who head the household?"

"The night we marry," Niles said, leaning in close so only she could hear him. His voice dropped to seductive levels and the brush of his breath against her sensitive ear made Penelope's toes curl under the table. "With a mouth such as yours, that will likely be the last night you ever comfortably sit down again."

His playful threat made her shiver all over, and the worst of it was Penelope couldn't decide if she was more bothered by the thought of finding herself held across his lap or simply by the idea of being held.

* * * *

A night in Niles' company made the Howell's rout pass way too quickly. Dinner ended and the dancing resumed. Lovers attempted to slip away for quiet trysts alone, and Penelope managed to avoid being manipulated anywhere near those scandalous garden doors. It was probably the first night all season that she could truly say she was enjoying being in Granville's company. The only problem was, she did still want

to help the people of Montague Close, but she was rapidly running out of time.

An even bigger problem was Niles consistent attentiveness. He hadn't left her alone all night. The closest that she came to being alone was the few seconds she had all to herself just after his hand left her arm and Rupert Reeves took its place. Aunt Agatha frowned all night long, but Niles kept her to himself regardless.

Yes, his attention was flattering. Yes, she was even enjoying the time she spent with him. He was a wonderful conversationalist, incredibly charming when he wanted to be, and hadn't stepped on her toes once or threatened her sitting abilities since dinner began. Unfortunately, because he wouldn't leave her alone, Penelope remained no closer to finding her way into Lady Howell's sitting room than she'd been the moment she'd arrived in her aunt's carriage. Unless she did something drastic, chances were she would end the evening by going home empty-handed.

Her first chance for 'something drastic' occurred when the sweet but gullible Rupert Reeves appeared at her side for yet another of his promised dances. He had tried to claim her for a waltz, but Niles had flatly refused to let her go. "Only minuets and country steps," he'd told Reeves. "The waltzes are all mine."

As it turned out, the fast-paced country step was exactly what Penelope needed. Halfway through the whirling gig, she faltered, reaching out her arms to catch Reeves' and closing her eyes as she swayed.

"Miss Blayne!" Reeves exclaimed. He caught her before she fell to her knees. "Good heavens! Oh dear, oh dear! Not another of your dizzy spells again. I thought you were feeling all right tonight!"

"I—" Penelope raised her hand to her temple. "I think I need t-to sit down."

"Here, take my arm." Reeves led her through the other dancers to the nearest chair.

"I think I'm going to faint," she gasped, stumbling and nearly falling but for his ever supportive grasp on her arm. She felt a tickle of chagrin for using her friend so shamelessly, especially when she peaked up at him surreptitiously through her lashes to find him turning in circles in front of her, looking frantically all around.

"There!" he cried and began waving one arm. "There's Lady Howell. I am sure she will have just the place for you to lie down. Oh dear, oh dear! Oh, and there is your sister, too!"

Uh oh—

"No, no," she said weakly. "Please, don't bother—"

But it was too late. Reeves called out Anstice's name and a few seconds later Anstice, followed by Lord Wentworth, pushed her way through the crowd to stand in front of them.

She gasped when she saw Penelope. "What's happened?" Suddenly her eyes narrowed, and she stared at her older sister with grave suspicion. "Penelope, what is the matter with you?"

"She has all but fainted at my feet!" Reeves declared, dropping onto one knee to pat Penelope's hand with quick, reviving smacks. "This happens with frightening regularity.

Miss Blayne, please tell me you have seen a doctor about these spells!"

Lady Howell stepped through the crowd beginning to grow around them. "What is going on here?"

Penelope covered her eyes with one hand, for the first time actually beginning to feel the honest pangs of a real headache beginning to pulse inside her skull. People were gathering around them, whispering, and if only there was a way of do so without attracting attention, she should have liked to kick Reeves to stop him from talking. Her nice, quiet 'something drastic' was turning into a fiasco. "I just—I'm not feeling very well. Everyone please, go back to what you were doing. I'm sure I'll be fine in a few minutes."

"Oh my heavens," Lady Howell said, touching one hand to her throat. A lady of fickle health herself, she'd always expressed great deal interest in the ailments of fellow sufferers. "Is it the air? I was afraid it would be too close in here, even with all the windows wide open. Poor child! Where is your aunt?"

"I shall find her," Lord Wentworth said helpfully and turned to go.

"No!" both Anstice and Penelope cried out simultaneously.

"I-I'd hate to disturb her over something as inconsequential as this," Penelope said weakly.

"A woman's health is anything but inconsequential," Lady Howell told her. "Really! Young women these days don't know the first thing about taking proper care of themselves."

Aunt Agatha barged her ample way through the crowd. "What is going on here?"

Penelope stifled an inward groan, and then again because right on the heels of her aunt came Niles. "What's happened?" he said, kneeling down beside her. "Penny! Are you all right?"

"It's nothing," she said, trying to disguise her growing irritation with meek fragility. "I merely felt a little faint. I think I had one too many crab cakes at dinner."

Aunt Agatha went from worried to annoyed before Penelope even finished the word 'crab'. "Oh for heaven's sake! Even a green girl in her first year knows not to stuff herself at a ball! Well, there's no help for it now. Have someone fetch our carriage," she told Reeves. "We are going home."

"Oh, but Auntie..." Anstice cried, looking back at the crestfallen Lord Wentworth.

But Aunt Agatha was not moved. "I will not risk the scandal of a collapse upon the floor. We have been the objects of way too much attention tonight as it is. Lady Howell, if I may prevail upon you to supply two footmen to carry my niece outside."

"I'll do it," Niles said, and bent down to lift Penelope into his arms.

Her eyes widened as she realized what he was about, and before he could get his strong arms beneath her, Penelope vault up from the chair and onto her feet. "I can walk! I can walk!"

Everyone stared at her in surprise.

"I am not," she said stiffly, "about to be carried about like an invalid."

"I see," Aunt Agatha said, a suspicious light entering her eyes.

"Here." Niles offered Penelope his arm. "Lean on me, then."

Lord Wentworth pulled Anstice aside. "I will come calling on you tomorrow. Do not look so sad, my darling. We will see each other then."

Anstice, unconsolated, sniffled with disappointment. It was a sound that went straight through Penelope. "Let me go home, Aunt Agatha. You and Anstice can stay."

"Nonsense. We came together, and that's how we shall leave."

"But this is so silly. To send everyone home on account of one small dizzy spell!" Penelope exclaimed.

"A dizzy spell is hardly nothing," Niles said as they left the brightly lit ball room behind and walked out into the cool night air. The Wainwright carriage was already waiting for them down at the bottom of the steps.

"I have never liked delicate females." She glared at the ground, thoroughly disgusted with herself for how the evening had turned out and not at all looking forward to the long ride home with Anstice glaring resentfully back at her in the darkness.

"Go home, go to bed, and get well," Niles told her, patting her hand comfortingly. "I will see you again soon."

* * * *

Niles stood on the front porch steps for a long time, watching the retreat of the Wainwright's carriage until he couldn't see it anymore.

"It's a pity they had to go rushing off like that," Wentworth said beside to him. The young lord stood with his hands clasped behind his back, his shoulders drooped with a disappointment of his own. "Miss Blayne looked perfectly recovered to me."

Niles frowned into the darkness. Come to think of it, Penelope had looked fairly normal. She hadn't really even seemed to need his support when he helped her up into the back of her aunt's carriage. Limited though his experience with swooning females might have been, it did strike him as somewhat odd that her dizziness would come on so quickly after he'd left her and then dissipate just as fast with his return to her side.

Come to think of it, there wasn't a single ball or rout that she had attended that had not been marred by either a torn flounce or one of these highly unusual sickly spells. Maybe his sister was right. Something was definitely odd about her. But what mischief was there, he wondered, for his beautiful and closely chaperoned Penny to get into, and why? A vision of Epstein's shop in Braybourne Alley came uninvited to his mind.

Niles folded his arms across his chest, his eyes narrowing speculatively. Perhaps it was time he paid Epstein's shop a little visit of his own.

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CHAPTER TEN

"Good morning, sir, and welcome to my shop! Solomon Epstein at your service."

It was a few minutes past ten o'clock the following morning and most of the city's upper class were still sound asleep in their beds. The lower class, on the other hand, had likely been up since dawn and here in Braybourne Alley the streets were already growing quite busy.

Niles stayed silent, holding the door open as Epstein's only other patron, a young lady, made her exit, and then he closed it and looked around the poorly lit shop. "I am looking for information."

Epstein tipped his head to one side. "Of what sort?"

"A young woman has been coming to your store. When she does, she is dressed all in black with a veil over her face."

Epstein smiled. "Your pardon, my lord, but that would describe half of the females who frequent my establish—" He paused, his eyes focusing on the five pound note that Niles took out of his wallet and held up in the air. The pawn broker's eyes turned crafty, and he looked at Niles as he slowly reached up to take the money. "She has been here twice to sell her jewelry. A sweet young lady with financial troubles."

"Do you still have the items?" Niles asked.

"I do. They are in the back."

"Bring them to me."

Glancing back down at Niles's wallet, the pawn broker then turned and disappeared into his shadowy backroom. He returned a few minutes later with two articles of jewelry, one in each hand. He lay them on the counter for Niles to see. The sapphire ring was small, the sort of thing a doting parent might bestow upon his daughter to make a certain occasion special, and the necklace was simple but elegant. And as Niles stood looking down at them, he felt like a first-rate heel.

Penelope had lied to him. She wasn't coming to Braybourne Alley for a taste of what manly life was like; she was coming to pawn her jewelry. He hadn't realized her family life had become that desperate, although with a father such as hers, he supposed he should have. Her small shoulders were doing their best to bear up under a terrible burden, and he had spanked her for it. Not once or twice, but three times.

"How much?" he asked, and paid Epstein's price without bartering the quids down. "If she brings anything else, pay her well for it and I will buy the pieces sight unseen. Sell them to no one else, do you understand?"

Epstein beamed graciously. "Absolutely, my lord. I understand perfectly."

Niles left the pawn shop with a very heavy heart and the ring and necklace in his pocket. There was no sense in waiting any longer; he would visit his solicitor tonight, and Penelope's father by the end of the week. Niles would ease the burdens from her impoverished shoulders and give her jewelry back to her as a wedding gift. Penelope would never have to worry about money again, he would see to that.

* * * *

For the embarrassment that Penelope had caused her in the Howells' ballroom, Aunt Agatha got her revenge. Penelope was put to bed for two days. Not only did she miss attending church on Sunday, but she missed the Wentworths' rout. An event that her aunt declared was an overwhelming success for Anstice.

And as if bed-ridden exile wasn't bad enough, Penelope was forced to pay for her misadventure at the Howells with a genuine stomach ache. The illness that followed was mostly likely brought on by the variety of Aunt Agatha's special homemade tonics and tinctures that were poured down Penelope's throat, every hour on the hour. The only thing that saved her was the potted lilies that Niles sent to cheer up her invalid's bedside. After the first day, Penelope fed her medicines to the flowers, effectively killing them but saving herself in the process.

Still, it took all of Penelope's powers of persuasion to convince her aunt that she was well enough by Wednesday to accompany Anstice to Lady Farnsworth's for tea.

"I shall allow it this once," Aunt Agatha had said. "But at the first sign of swooning, back into bed you go!"

"Really!" Penelope pouted, as the Wainwright carriage made its way through the crowded afternoon streets. "As if I'm the only woman who has ever felt faint at one of these big affairs."

"You are the only woman who makes a habit of it," Anstice replied with a smile. "Well, aside from Lady Abernathy that is."

"Laugh all you want to. You weren't the one who had to swallow all of those horribly vile medicines!" Penelope shuddered expressively. "I don't know what she gave me Sunday night, but I've never been so sick in all my life!"

"It serves you right," Anstice said without sympathy. "Robbing from the rich and giving to the poor demands an exacting price."

Penelope frowned. "If it means swallowing more of that awful tincture she gave me on Sunday, then the price is almost more than I can tolerate!"

"Good! Maybe you'll give up the nonsense."

"Maybe I'll give up on feeling faint as a method of gaining entry to sitting rooms, and look for a method that's much more discrete."

Now it was Anstice's turn to scowl, and the carriage stayed quiet until it pulled up to the Farnsworth House.

Angel met them in the morning room. Dressed in a simple white muslin gown that seemed almost to sparkle in the sunlight that streamed through the window, she sat waiting for them on a plush red settee like a prized gem on display.

"Good morning," she beamed, rising as gracefully as her namesake implied and gliding across the room to greet them. "I'm so glad you both could come!"

"Thank you for inviting us," Penelope replied as she kissed the air just centimeters from Lady Farnsworth's cheek.

"My heavens," Anstice said softly as she looked about them, from the Persian carpet beneath their feet to the ornately painted oriental pot by the fireplace. A huge portrait took up one entire wall, floor to ceiling: Angel, sitting in a tranquil park-like setting, with deer in the background and squirrels at her feet. And every available shelf throughout was dressed with a scattering of statuettes and fragile knick-knacks. "What a lovely room!"

Angel beamed. "Thank you. I love little things. Would you like to see what Niles brought me from the country?"

Penelope's interest perked. "Absolutely."

Angel swept them from the fireplace to a gold-gilded china hutch with shelves made of glass. She opened the doors.

"This is a goose egg, believe it or not."

The object she brought down shared resemblance to an egg only by being oval in shape. Painted blue, it sparkled as much as Angel's dress, from the gold filigree that trimmed it to the little lock on the little hatch door that Angel swung open. Inside, on a poofy red pillow with little yellow tassels, sat a porcelain white and brown beagle puppy.

"Oh!" Penelope and Anstice both sighed.

"I don't know where he finds these things, but isn't it the most precious thing you've ever seen?"

"It's beautiful!" Penelope softly declared.

Smiling proudly, Angel lovely replaced the egg back on its tiny gold stand and closed the glass doors again. "Let's go have some tea."

No sooner had she summoned on the fireplace bell pull than did the door swing open, admitting a duo of servants

bearing refreshment trays. An assortment of sweet biscuits and slices of lemon were interspersed among the delicate china cups, teapot, and sugar and creamer pots, and the women retreated to the red settee and its matching chairs by the fire to consume them.

"So," Angel began as she poured. "My brother seems completely besotted by your charms."

It was a good thing Penelope had not yet began to drink, otherwise she might have coughed her tea through her nose. Heat fanned her face, spreading out all through her body and pooling down in her belly in a warm and liquidly arousing way. "Oh, well ... I..."

Angel laughed. "You need say nothing, my dear. I can already see by the look on your face that you feel the same about him. Good heavens! Just look at her pinken at the mere mention of my brother."

"I do not pinken," Penelope said, blushing furiously.

"You do," Angel said merrily. "Doesn't she look quite flushed, Miss Blayne?"

"Quite," Anstice traitorously agreed.

"I do not," Penelope stressed, "pinken."

"So sayeth the cherry-cheeked miss," Angel quipped.

There was no point in protesting further, and so Penelope locked her jaw and sipped her tea and willed herself to stop 'pinkening' immediately. Angel took advantage of the light moment to steer the conversation slightly askew. "How is your health these days, by the way? No more dizzy spells?"

Just the mere mention of illness made Penelope shudder, the motley flavors of Aunt Agatha's various medicinal brews

flitting across her tastebuds in memories somewhat less than fond. "I am happy to say if I am not completely recovered, then I am well on my way to it."

"Have you seen a doctor about them? I mean, do you know what could be causing them?"

"Oh!" Anstice suddenly cried out, her tea cup overturning in her lap. She vaulted to her feet, shaking and swiping at her stained skirts in an effort to keep the hot liquid from burning her skin. "Oh, how clumsy of me!"

"Anstice, are you all right?" Penelope jumped up as well.

Angel immediately rang for a servant and produced a handkerchief, with which she began to dab ineffectually at the ugly brown stain spreading down the front of Anstice's pink and white dress. "Oh, dear heavens me! I hope this isn't ruined!"

"Never mind my dress," Anstice tearfully cried. "What about your floor? These beautiful rugs! Oh, please tell me they were not dear!"

Angel pishawed, waving one hand negligently. "Nowhere near as dear as your skin, Miss Blayne. Please don't worry yourself over my floor coverings."

But Angel did drop down onto her knees to give the rugs a closer look, completely missing the look that passed from Anstice to Penelope. By the time the commotion died and the women again settle down to finish their tea, all opportunity to inquire after Penelope's mysterious maladies had passed.

Her short-lived career as an interrogator now over, Angel had little else to do but settle back and enjoy the company of

her guests, and Penelope heaved as big a sigh of relief as her corset and Angel's watchful eyes would allow.

* * * *

It was a good thing that illness had already taken Lucy's life, otherwise Niles would have been tempted to kill his late wife all over again. He came away from paying yet another of her secret debts with a sick taste in his mouth and a frustrated skepticism that he would ever see the last of her back alley loans.

By the time he reached the Faversham's townhouse, Angel's visit with the Blayne sisters had already ended. He was barely in time to catch a glimpse of the back of the Wainwright carriage as it wound its way through the crowded streets for home. It was all he could do not to chase off down the road after it. It was shameful, what he found himself willing to do all for a glimpse of Penelope and the chance of receiving one of her smiles. But he had already run his horse ragged in the race just to get here, and as it stood already, the gossip-mills were going to run overtime when their banns were read in church. So, Niles allowed the carriage to disappear and he went inside to pay his sister a visit.

"The only truly disappointing part was not finding anything even remotely odd about them," Angel told him, as they settled side-by-side on the settee in her library. "The Blayne sisters both seem perfectly nice in every way. I was really rather hoping I'd find at least one small imperfection."

"That's all right, my darling," Niles told her, running his fingers through his hair. "I went back to Braybourne Alley, as

I should have done the first time I caught her there. Apparently, things are so grim in the Blayne family that Penelope is pawning her jewelry."

Angel gasped. "Oh, that poor girl! Her jewelry?"

"I bought it back again," Niles assured her, and then turned to face her as if to brace her for the news. "It will be my wedding gift to Penelope."

Unlike that night at Lady Spencer's ball, this time the news of his interest hardly seemed to faze his sister. "As I said, I find myself growing rather fond of Miss Blayne. I think she will make you a wonderful wife."

Niles relaxed with a smile, then nodded. "One can always hope."

* * * *

Penelope and Anstice spilled into their aunt's house giggling, their time at Lady Faversham's having put them in a good mood. Her damning secret still seemed safe, although Penelope knew Angel quite likely did suspect something. She probably didn't know exactly what to suspect Penelope guilty of, but it was enough to bring Penelope to one undeniable conclusion: It was time to quit.

She was no modern day Robin Hood. Instead, she had merely done something incredibly stupid and been lucky enough to get away with it.

Anstice had been right all along. Telling her as much had been paramount to dissipating the dark clouds that had hovered over the Blayne household for weeks now and the look of relief that had come over Anstice's face, the smile that

she had bequeathed to Penelope on the ride home, had been the brightest that Penelope could ever remember seeing. At least until they arrived home and were met at the door by Graves.

"This missive arrived for you," their aunt's butler said, handing the note to Anstice. "And this madame," he said, handing another to Penelope, "came for you about twenty minutes ago."

The sisters looked at one another, and then Anstice tore her missive open. She gave a squeal of delight. "Lord Wentworth is coming at two to take me riding!" She gave a sharp gasp, swinging around to check the time on the massive grandfather clock that dominated the front hall. "Oh good heavens! He'll be here any minute!" She touched her hair. "I have to get ready." She looked down at herself. "I have to change."

Without a backwards look at Penelope, she grabbed up her skirts and fled upstairs. At the top of the second floor, she let out a very unladylike whoop of joy and did a dance on the landing before disappearing down the hall for her bedroom.

Penelope grinned at the dour-faced Graves. "She's very excited."

"So I see," he intoned. Claspng his hands behind his back, he gave Penelope a quick nod of his partially balding head and walked off down the hall to continue about his business.

Penelope glanced down at the note in her hand, turning it over to look at the red wax seal. Though she had expected to see the Granville emblem, there was no mark upon it. She

quirked an eyebrow, then slipped her finger under the flap and broke the seal.

She froze as she read the carefully scripted note:

I know you for a thief. If you want to keep your secret out of the public's knowledge, then you will meet me in Hyde Park at two.

All the blood drained from her face. Her hands and knees both began to shake.

"Miss?"

Penelope snapped her head up and looked at the maid standing on the bottommost step of the stairs.

The maid tipped her head with curious concern. "Are you all right, miss?"

Penelope bobbed her head. "Y-yes," she stammered and tried to smile, surreptitiously tucking the note into a fold of her dress. "Of course. I'm fine."

Unconvinced, the maid nevertheless stepped down into the entry hall and started to walk away.

Turning her back to the maid, Penelope found herself staring at the note again. Two o'clock.

"Wait!" she called to the maid, who promptly stopped and looked back at her. "Please let Graves know I require immediate use of the carriage. Tell Marie I will take her with me and to hurry and get ready."

The maid bobbed. "Right away, miss."

I know you for a thief.

Turning on her heel, Penelope hurried into the Wainwright study. She tore the note into pieces all the way across the room before throwing it into the fire in the hearth. She didn't

bother to watch the papers burning, but spun back around. One hand on her hip, she pressed her other palm to her forehead and her eyes fell upon the chair of her late uncle's desk. In that moment she could all but feel Niles' hand walloping down on her bottom over and over again. Just as it had the last time she'd been in this room, before Aunt Agatha had barged in just in time to witness her humiliating stint in the corner with her skirts pinned up to her shoulders.

Her eyes began to tear, but she stubbornly blinked them back. Crying would do no good now, and she needed a clear head. At least until she found out who had sent her that note and exactly what and how much he or she knew.

Marie came hurrying down the hall, throwing a warm wrap around her shoulders as she came. "Graves 'as the 'orses ready now, miss. Is Miss Anstice not comin'?"

"No," Penelope said. "I don't want to distract her from her visitor."

The sun nearly blinded her as she swept out the door and down the steps. The rays fell across her shoulders like a warming mantle, but she took little notice of it. She climbed up into the back of the Wainwright carriage, turning her face towards the window and chewing on her fingernail while Marie settled herself beside the driver. Although she likely would not have made good company in the nerve-wracked mood that she was in, the long silent ride to Hyde Park was torturous.

By the time the carriage rolled to a stop beneath the shade of a drooping willow tree, Penelope felt almost numb. Her mind had conjured a variety of horrible consequences that

could result from her crimes becoming common knowledge. How could she ever have thought she would not get caught. The absolute best that she could hope for now was the good fortune to be shunned from Society, but even that seemed a punishment beyond bearing when she considered that all of her family would be marked by the same stigma of shame that she had brought upon herself.

Penelope left Marie sitting on a bench by the fountain and wandered off through the park on her own. She found a place to wait, a shady spot between two ancient oaks that was visible from nearly every part of the park. Though she posed herself as if she were engrossed by the overflowing flowerbeds, she barely saw the blooms rippling in the afternoon breeze. And she certainly never heard the footsteps approaching her from behind.

"Beautiful day, isn't it, Miss Blayne?"

Though spoken softly and pleasantly, the voice came directly beside her and it made Penelope jump. She turned in surprise, her eyes falling on Mr. Stawel. "Oh!" She blinked at him in startlement, then hazarded a quick glance around. "I, uh ... I didn't expect to see you here."

He smiled, his eyes widening pleasantly. "I beg your pardon. Were you perhaps waiting for someone else?"

"Who, me?" Penelope tried to laugh but her voice was high and strained and very suspicious sounding, even to herself. "Shame on you for suggesting such a thing. That's hardly something a lady such as myself would do."

His smile broadened. "I see."

"No, it's just, uh...." Penelope cast about for a good excuse and, somewhat desperately, pointed down at the flowers. "It's such a beautiful day. I simply thought I would, um, take a walk."

"What a wonderful idea," he said silkily, and held out his arm. "Why don't we take a walk?"

"Oh, well..." Penelope looked around the park, her eyes skipping from one casual stroller to another. But none of them looked particularly interested in coming to talk to her ... Except Stawel. She turned slowly back to him, eyeing him suspiciously. He noticed the change in her and his smile widened even more. "It's you," she said flatly.

"Tell me, Miss Blayne," Stawel said, scratching his chin. "Is thievery a family affair? It certainly would explain how the Blayne household has managed to do so well with as little as they are reputed to have."

Penelope felt her face go red and for the second time that day, her knees wobbled on the verge of giving out beneath her. "What do you want?"

"Money," he said bluntly.

"I don't have any."

"On the contrary, I think you've got quite a bit." He reached out for her hand, tucking it into the crook of his elbow and began to walk with her. "Let's move around, shall we? We don't want to attract the attention of any tongue wagglers."

She pulled her hand from his grasp at the first opportunity, but she had no choice but to walk beside him, following his lead down the manicured path that wound through the park.

"If only I had known of your clever little fingers earlier; I would have pursued you more vigorously."

"I don't have any money," Penelope insisted. "And I never kept anything that I took."

"Of course you didn't. You are a smart woman. You would have known enough to take the valuable but incriminating evidence to the nearest Jew to sell. I lay awake nearly all of last night trying to remember just how many of your infamous dizzy spells and torn dresses you've suffered this year. Clever girl. Most clever indeed. You must have made a right fortune!"

"I've already told you, I never kept anything. So if it's your intention to—" Penelope stopped abruptly when he caught hold of her hand, rounding to face her with a look that was anything but smiling and amused right now. She winced as his fingers closed tightly around her own.

"Come now, my darling Penelope. I may call you by your given name, may I not? Let us not be greedy, hm? If we are going to develop an association—" She tried to take back her hand but he only squeezed her fingers tighter until she stopped. "—then we need to learn to be honest with one another."

"I gave it all away," she told him softly, dropping her tone when a movement at the corner of her eye alerted her to the presence of a young couple strolling not that far away. As soon as they passed, engrossed enough in their own conversation to give little attention to either Stawel or Penelope, she hissed, "Every penny. I gave it away." She

tried again to reclaim her hand, but gave up in a wince.

"You're hurting my hand."

"I'm going to hurt a good deal more than that unless I gain some cooperation from you, my dear."

"What do you want?" she asked.

"A business arrangement. My silence in exchange for your services."

"Ow!" She caught hold of her wrist with the hand he wasn't trying to crush and, as she began to bow before him, he released her fingers. Penelope gasped, cradling her throbbing hand against her stomach. "Please let me go!"

"The Cavendish ball is coming up next week," Stawel told her, clasping his hands behind his back. He smiled and a familiar, friendly warmth returned to his voice. "I realize Lady Cavendish will likely be wearing her famous rubies, however she does have that most delightful and, dare I say, valuable set of diamonds. You are going to tear your ruffles or swoon or whatever your clever little mind conjures up, and you are going to get them for me."

She looked up at him with wide and horrified eyes. "No!"

"Yes," he corrected coldly. "You will."

"I couldn't!"

"I think right now you should be more concerned with what I could do. For instance, I could quite easily and without the slightest regret destroy you and your whole family. All it would take is a word or two, whispered in just the right ears. A note sent to just the right home. Poor Anstice. Lady Wentworth would never allow her son to court a family of

thieves. Poor Penelope. How could Lord Granville have anything to do with you then?"

A fresh rush of tears filled her eyes and Penelope had to look away lest he see them. "You're a monster," she whispered.

"Deliver the diamonds to me and I'll forgive you for saying that." Stawel smiled, stepping closer to her as he inclined his head, bringing his lips to within kissing distance, and without the slightest shame or discretion gazed upon her bosom where it swelled gently above her low neckline. "Of course, your lack of respect will cause our particular arrangement to continue for longer than simply the Cavendish affair. Perhaps until the Sherringham rout. Lady Sherringham has a mouth-watering emerald and pearl pendant that should bring a very pretty price. Unless of course, you would like to apologize now ... in that sweet and loving way that women are wont to apologize to their men."

"You are not mine," Penelope contradicted, taking a large step sideways. "A fact to which, with every passing second, I grow increasingly grateful."

Though he smiled, it failed to reach as far as his eyes. "An apology would have done you a good sight better. Continue on like this, and our association may continue indefinitely."

"No," she told him, a stab of anger leaving her shaking all over. "If I do this, I do it one time and then you never speak to me again."

"You are lovely," Stawel told her. "But you are also in no position to make demands. You will, in fact, do whatever I tell you to, or suffer the consequences in the public eye."

"You really are a monster," she sobbed, turning away from him. She covered her mouth with one hand, trying to think.

"Now, now, my sweet. Let's not have any tears. What will people say?" Stawel walked around her, surveying the other patrons of the park. "I do believe it past time that we parted ways."

Penelope swiped at her eyes. "If I do this, how will I get the diamonds to you?"

"If you do this?" Stawel asked, arching an eyebrow back at her. "If, my darling? How quaint! I will meet you in the Cavendish library at midnight. If," he said again, smirking, and chuckled as he walked away.

She wanted to throw something after him, but the problem was he was right. There was no 'if'. Penelope quite simply didn't have a choice.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

The whole way home Penelope fought against her tears. The Cavendish diamonds. There was no way that the theft of those would go unnoticed. There was, in fact, a very good chance that this time she would be caught. And yet, if she didn't go then with certainty she would be caught—betrayed by Stawel—and then everyone would know everything.

Some Robin Hood she turned out to be. Huddled in her carriage like a frightened rabbit, terrified of the consequences of what she'd done, with no safe Sherwood Forest to run and hide in. No matter what she did, her thefts were in danger of betraying her and she didn't know what to do. To obey Stawel, the most distasteful of her options, was also the only option she could see that still had a very slim chance of ending this nightmare with her secret intact.

She didn't have a choice. She simply did not have a choice. She was going to have to take the Cavendish diamonds. The prospect left her feeling sick to her stomach and by the time she arrived back at her aunt's townhouse her queasiness had left her just as faint as ever she had faked it.

"Where have you been?" Aunt Agatha exclaimed in a shrill whisper. She latched onto Penelope's arm, in her excitement, her fingers digging into the soft flesh of Penelope's arm like talons as she dragged the younger woman through the front door.

"I-I-I—" Penelope stammered.

But Aunt Agatha waved her hand and shook her graying head. "Never mind, never mind! It doesn't matter. The important thing is that you are here now."

Penelope blinked at her. "Auntie, whatever is the matter?" Her knees suddenly went weak. Oh no! Stawel had lied to her; he had exposed her thefts anyway!

"What's wrong?!" her aunt cried, staring at her niece as if the girl had suddenly sprouted horns. Taking hold of Penelope's shoulders, she spun her niece around and pointed back out into the graveled driveway. "Just look at that!"

Looking back the way she'd come, Penelope stared in growing dismay at the huge black carriage that she had walked right passed on her way back from the park. The Granville insignia was as bold as daylight where it hung on the door. "He's here," she said dully.

"Lord Granville has been closeted with your father for almost twenty minutes, now," Aunt Agatha crowed, clapping her hands with poorly contained glee. "Don't you understand? He's proposing! The Season has been a success!"

The sick sensation in the pit of Penelope's belly intensified.

"Hurry," Aunt Agatha told her. "Upstairs with you, girl. Wash your face; change your clothes. Put on that lovely blue dress—no! The brand new silver one we just got back from Madame Balfree's. You look ravishing in that one, it goes so well with your eyes." The old woman looked at her critically before pinching the apples of her cheeks quite fiercely. "And add some color in your face. Good heavens, you look pale as a ghost! And smile! No, no! Don't smile. Don't bother smiling. Just hurry and get that new dress on! Shoo, shoo!"

Aunt Agatha turned her to the stairs and gave her a swat on the seat of her skirts to get her moving. "Quickly now! They'll ask for you any minute!"

Penelope stumbled blindly towards her room. Niles had come for her, just as he'd said he would. Oh, how could this day get any worse? She barely managed to get her bedroom door closed behind her before she burst into tears.

* * * *

"Come in, come in!" Lord Blayne exclaimed when Graves showed Niles into the Wainwright's den. He then stood for a moment in utter perplexity, glancing first to his left and then his right, staring at the mounds and mounds of dusty accumulated odds and ends that covered every available sitting place.

Bits of bones and boxes were scattered over every flat surface, including the floor, knee deep in some places. The only light in the room came from the sunshine streaming in through the twin windows behind the desk. Dust particles danced in the air between them as Lord Blayne tried valiantly to seat the young earl like a proper host should. In the end, he dove for the nearest chair, scooping up arm loads of what rocks and bones currently took up the seat cushion. He deposited them with great carefulness on the settee across the room.

"Here you are," he exclaimed with a smile, brushing off his hands on his trousers. "Sit there."

Niles caught himself studying some of the bones as he made his way from the relatively uncluttered doorway to the

incredibly dusty chair. Of all the things that he'd heard about the notoriously reclusive Lord Blayne, little had come even remotely close to the truth.

Niles did his best to brush off the chair before sitting down, glancing as he did so to his right where a worn and weathered vertebrae crowned a narrow table. It had to be quite the largest backbone he'd ever seen in his life. It overhung the table it rested upon, the diameter of the bone being easily two feet high and four feet across.

"What is that?" he couldn't help but question, thumbing to the bone. "Whale?"

"Oh, heavens no!" Lord Blayne told him, shaking his head. "That, my boy, belonged to a monster that must have lived hundreds if not thousands of years ago. Fortunately for everyone, it's been long since extinct. And let me tell you, if you think that old thing's amazing, well," Lord Blayne laughed, "you should see the teeth!"

Niles arched his eyebrow, half smiling at the impossibly large vertebrae.

"Here, here!" Lord Blayne exclaimed, as he dived headfirst into one of the many boxes and began digging through its contents. "Let me show you something truly amazing." A few seconds later, he came up with a triangular rock, serrated on two sides, which tapered into a thin point at the end. He held it out to Niles. "Take a look at this."

"Good Lord," Niles said. "Is that a tooth?"

"Have you ever seen anything half as magnificent?"

Niles turned the tooth over and over in his hand, feeling the weight and the sharpness, before Lord Blayne's words

finally sank in. He gave himself a firm mental shake and lowered the rock. "Yes sir, I have actually had the privilege of knowing something as magnificent." And then, thinking Penelope might object to being compared to a fossil, add, "Much more so, in fact."

"More than a shark tooth of that size?" Lord Blayne looked astounded, and then suddenly embarrassed. "Oh, I see. You are referring to my daughter. Ah, which ... which one are you here about again?"

"Penelope," Niles said.

"Ah yes," Lord Blayne said. "Well, my girls are, quite naturally, magnificent too." Although perhaps not as much as the fossils scattered throughout the room. Wisely, the older man left that part unsaid however. He cleared his throat instead. "Right. And that's why you are here. Because of Penelope."

"Yes."

"Uncommon woman, my daughter." Lord Blayne walked around his desk and looked at his chair. His eyes flicked back up at Niles, almost guiltily, and then he sat. "She's smart. Attractive. Wouldn't hurt a fly. Has a big heart of gold."

"She is all of that," Niles agreed.

"She plays chess, you know."

Niles nodded.

"Very well, too, I might add." The old lord managed a laugh and rapped sharply upon the desk with two knuckles. "Almost plays better than I do these days. Beats me almost half the time, you know." He blinked at Granville. "Actually ... more than half the time, come to think of it." He gave Niles a

somewhat guilty look. "There's no dancing around it. We may as well come to the meat of the matter. I have nothing to give with her hand. There is no dower; no bridal price. Nothing. Not even a ha'penny hidden away anywhere."

Niles nodded again. "I am well aware of the situation in regards to that."

"Good, good. And you're still here. Marvelous. Well then, there is one other slight," Lord Blayne held up two fingers a scant half inch apart, "ugly matter that should probably be addressed. We are quite firmly in the River Tick."

Niles held up a staying hand. "I think we can safely assume I am required to pull you out again. Bolstering the Blayne coffers is a duty I am only too happy to perform. My wallet is at your disposal, sir, so long as the demands aren't too unreasonable. But I am fully prepared to do whatever it takes to make Penelope my own. Money is a small enough matter compared to that."

The old man looked pleasantly surprised. "I may need more than just a little bolstering, you know."

"If that is what it takes." Niles crossed his legs. He started to fold his hands together, then remembered he was still holding the humongous tooth and quickly put it down on Lord Blayne's desk before continuing. "The point is, I am willing to grant whatever influx of cash will be required to help put your family back in the black. I will even provide a dowry for Anstice. I believe Lord Wentworth would take her to wife without one, but his mama would be less of an obstacle to the joining if your youngest daughter brought a little something to the family with her. My wallet will not be open to you

indefinitely, however. But I am willing to do it this time because I love Penelope."

The set of Lord Blayne's shoulders eased with relief. "I believe you do, my boy. Isn't it funny? A man would do almost anything for the woman he loves." The old man's eyes went misty. "My Mary was the same. I would have done anything for her."

"I have your blessing then," Niles asked, gently bringing Lord Blayne's attention back to the matter at hand.

Lord Blayne stood up and extended his hand across the desk. "Yes, my boy. You do."

Niles cracked a genuine smile for the first time since his arrival. "Thank you." Once more his eyes fell upon the giant tooth, and he reached over to pick it up. "Now then, why don't you tell me about the monster who shed this beast."

* * * *

Penelope paced her room wildly, wringing her hands and swiping back useless tears from her cheeks. Her mind was a jumble of hurriedly hatched plans for what to do next, but none of them seemed very likely to work. With nothing else to do and knowing she was running out of time, she finally settled on a temporary plan. One that had worked well for her all Season long.

She played sick.

By the time Aunt Agatha burst into her room with the happy summons that her presence would now be welcomed in the den below, Penelope was huddled in a ball beneath her bedcovers, facing the wall.

"Lazy bones!" Aunt Agatha cried incredulously. "What are you doing in bed at this of all times? I told you to get ready for Lord Granville's proposal! He's downstairs right now, waiting to put himself on bended knee before you. Get up, girl! Get—"

Ripping away the blankets, Aunt Agatha took one look at Penelope and gasped, horrified.

As white as a ghost, her skin both clammy and cold, and shaking violently, Penelope rolled slowly onto her back to gaze blearily up at her aunt. Though chattering teeth, she stammered, "Oh, A-a-auntie, I-I am so-o-o c-c-c-cold."

Aunt Agatha clapped a hand over her mouth and shrieked into it. "You're sick! How can you be sick at a time like this? No, no, don't move!" She quickly flung the blankets back over her ailing charge and vigorously tucked her back in. "I've got to fetch the doctor. You must get well this instant!"

She turned and fled for the door, moving her sizeable bulk with surprising quickness.

"Marie!" She charged out the door, her bellows echoing down the hallway as she raced for the stairs. "Summon Dr. Watts! Tell him it's an emergency! Sick! On this of all days!"

Penelope lifted her head off the pillow, watching the doorway and listening intently to make sure her aunt was not in danger of rushing back in. But the only head that poked around the corner to peer back at her was Anstice's.

"What is going on in here? Are you not well?" she asked.

Penelope beckoned to her, bringing her sister into the room. Once the door was safely closed behind her, Penelope

threw back the blankets and rushed to the window. "No, I'm not sick. I am only pretending."

"But why?"

"Oh, Anstice, I am in so much trouble!" Penelope lost her tentative emotional control to a sob.

Anstice blinked owlishly as her sister threw the glass pane open and leaned out into the cool spring air. With the utmost reluctance, she asked, "What kind of trouble?"

"Lord Granville is downstairs." Penelope splashed her face, neck and chest with cold water from the night stand. It soaked into the front of her gown like sweat, and she even dabbed under her arms and trickled some over her shoulder down the small of her back. Then she leaned out the window and let the coolness of the weather thoroughly chill her.

Anstice shook her head. "I don't understand you. I thought you liked him. Or has he been high handed with you again?"

"Oh, I wish it were something that simple," Penelope moaned, close onto tears. "And I do. I do like him. In spite of everything, I do."

"Then why are you—"

"Because I've been found out!" Shivering in the cold and splashing herself with more water, Penelope's teeth began to chatter for real. "I'm caught."

Anstice turned as pale as her sister. "What?"

"I'm found out! And now I am being blackmailed as well."

"By who?"

"Mr. Stawel, that wretch!"

"Stawel?" Anstice stumbled to the end of Penelope's bed, and leaned heavily against one of the posts. "What does he want?"

"The Cavendish diamonds. If I don't get them to him by midnight the night of Lady Cavendish's ball, then he will expose me for a thief. We will all be ruined. Oh, Anstice, you were right! Why didn't I listen to you?" Penelope began to cry all over again. "I cannot marry Lord Granville. I cannot have him anywhere close to me, or my shame will tarnish him too. And Lord Wentworth—"

Anstice's face paled.

"I've ruined your life too!" Penelope wailed.

There was a sudden commotion out in the hall and she quickly dashed away her tears, snapping the window quickly shut. She ran back to bed, leaping beneath the covers a bare second before Aunt Agatha charged back into the room. With a bottle in one hand and a large spoon in the other, she took one look at Anstice's pale face and let out another horrified shriek. "Oh no! Not you, too!"

"Auntie." Anstice covered her stomach with one hand, weaving a little on her feet as she turned around. "I do believe I am going to be sick."

"Marie!" Dropping both the medicine and spoon, Aunt Agatha was barely in time to catch her niece before her knees buckled and she collapsed on the floor.

* * * *

"So then Lady Wainwright appears in the doorway," Niles told his sister, much later that evening. "She says that both

Penelope and Anstice have fallen ill and will be unable to come downstairs."

"How dreadful!" Angel tsked, leaning back in her chair as a servant placed a roasted dove upon her plate. "She will be all right, though, won't she?"

"I have been assured that it's nothing too serious. She has simply overdone herself too soon after her last illness." Spreading his napkin in his lap, Niles shook his head. "I only hope she will not be as frail in health as Lucy was. She always seems so robust. I never know quite what to make of all these mysterious spells."

"Even the most hale and hearty of us has our moments of weaknesses," Angel told him sagely.

"True. But I don't like leaving things unfinished. My unanswered proposal is definitely considered unfinished, and it's the most important thing of all." Niles growled his frustration. "In all likelihood, I will be left to wait on an answer until Lady Cavendish's ball on Friday."

"If Miss Blayne is even well enough to attend on Friday."

Niles gave her a stern look. "What a ray of optimistic sunshine you turned out to be."

She smiled at him. "I am sorry, Niles my darling. Of course she will be there. And of course she will say yes, and throw herself into your arms and kiss you passionately. After all, what woman can resist a tall, dark, and handsome man, such as yourself, who is also domineering and arrogant and prone to spank upon a whim and..."

Resting his hands to either side of his plate, he glared. "If it's your intention to rile my spanking whim, then you are certainly going about it the right way."

"Is this not helping?" Angel asked with exaggerated innocence.

"No."

"So terribly sorry."

The Townshends' butler entered the dining hall. "Your pardon, my lady. There is a Miss Blayne at the door. She says it is most urgent that she speaks with you."

"Please show her to my sitting room," Angel told him, and then faced her brother, who looked back with surprise widened eyes. "I thought you said she was ill."

"That is what I was told." Niles snatched the napkin from his lap and dropped it on the table next to his half finished plate. He and Angel both hurried to the sitting room, and Niles felt a shock of delight as he took in the sight of Penelope standing by the window, wringing her hands and biting on her lip.

"Miss Blayne?" Angel exclaimed. "Tell me you haven't come here alone!" She took in the pale and sober look on Penelope's face. "Whatever is the matter?"

Penelope looked from Angel to Niles, and then back again. "I am sorry for coming here. I know how awful it is for me to disturb you, unannounced and at this hour, but...." she looked at Niles again. "I had to speak to you ... in person."

An horrible icy sensation began to trickle down through the middle of him, but he went to her, taking her hands in his. "What is it, Penny my love? You know you can talk to me

about anything, but are you really well enough to be out of bed?"

"Let's not talk about this in the doorway," Angel said. Ever the proper hostess, she gestured to the settee. "Sit down, Miss Blayne."

With Niles right behind her, Penelope preceded them to the couch and sank onto the cushions at the end closest to the fireplace. With the amber light illuminating her worried face, she clutched her hands in her lap, wringing her fingers, first one hand and then the other.

"Shall I ring for tea?" Angel asked, sitting beside her while Niles pulled a chair up to sit directly in front of Penelope, who shook her head, her eyes fixed firmly down in her lap.

"All right, then," Niles told her. "What is it you've come to tell me?"

Penelope sat staring at her hands, not answering for a long moment. Just as Niles was about to reach for her, to cup her chin and force her eyes to his, he glimpsed the shine of twin tears winding their way down her cheeks. "I cannot marry you," she softly told him.

Angel drew back, her hand rising to the fidget with the pearl necklace that entwined her throat. "Oh dear."

There were no words more painful than those in all the English language, and Niles sat there, holding her hands, watching her cry, with absolutely no idea of how to counter them. "Why not?"

"Because I would bring nothing but shame to your name." Penelope closed her eyes, turning her face away as she blurted, "I am being blackmailed."

"Blackmailed?" Angel sat back, stunned. "How? For what? By who?"

Niles held up a silencing hand as Penelope began to weep openly.

"I am to steal Lady Cavendish's diamond necklace or he will accuse me of thievery," she told them.

Angel's jaw dropped. "What? How can he?"

Nile's sat back in the chair, staring at Penelope in shock.

Penelope shook her head, still not meeting his eyes. "I don't know. But he says he can. I don't want to do this. I won't take that necklace." For the first time, she dared to look at him, and in the depths of her blue eyes he saw only sorrow and genuine dismay. "I am going to force Stawel's hand. So you see, I can't marry you. He is going to destroy my family; we will be shunned. That will be hard enough to bear without knowing that I have brought the same fate to you, as well. Please understand, I don't think I could survive that."

Niles didn't move. In flashes of memory he recalled each time he'd caught her at Braybourne Alley, each ball and rout that had ended with her either ill or ending the evening in a ruined gown, and then he thought of the jewels he had bought back from Epstein. Looking in her tear-filled eyes, Niles knew without a doubt that there was more to Penelope's story than she was saying. And there was a dreadful sinking in his gut that suggested his darkest suspicion right now was most likely the truth.

"Is there any truth behind his threat?" he heard himself ask, sounding a hundred times more calm than he honestly felt inside.

Penelope averted her eyes again. "No," she said, but it was her body language that he believed.

Niles was torn between the near overwhelming urge to pull her onto his lap and hold her, and the increasingly stronger impulse to grab her by the shoulders and shake her fiercely. How could she have done something so stupid? Why had she done it?

The deep pulsing of his own anger grew to fill his ears. His hands began to shake and he knew by the look on Penelope's face that his own must have darkened. She was shying away from him; he was having a hard time summoning enough gentle understanding to care.

Angel seemed to have enough for both of them. She reached over to pat Penelope's tightly clenched hands. "That villain! You know, I've never much cared for him and now I know why! Niles, we have to do something! There must be some way for us to help. Brother?"

Niles stood up, still staring down at Penelope. "Excuse me."

"Where are you going?" Angel asked.

"I need a moment alone."

"Niles!" his sister scolded, but he turned his back on both his sister and the blonde, blue-eyed woman that he'd foolishly come to care for. He stalked without another word from the study, slamming the door hard behind him.

A thief? He couldn't believe it. How could she have done something so foolish? So devastatingly stupid? And how could he have been so naive as to be taken in by her?

"Damn!" he bellowed in the cavernous hall mere seconds before Angel came charging out into the hall after him. She, however, had the presence of mind to close the sitting room door quietly, although not before he heard Penelope's piteous weeping.

"What is the matter with you?" Angel demanded, her normally laughing eyes flashing with anger. "How can you turn your back on her now when she needs you so much?"

"How do you know she didn't do exactly as Stawel claims?" Niles snapped back at her.

"How can you say that?" Angel demanded him. "What's the matter with you? Do you love the girl or not?"

"I love an honest girl!" Niles erupted. "Not a thief who preys upon her friends!"

Angel's jaw dropped. "Niles!"

"Have you checked your jewelry box lately?" Niles retorted. "You did have a visit from the Blayne sisters last week."

Angel inclined her head, staring at him much as a hound listened to a high-pitched whistle. "I don't understand you, brother. Perhaps she has done something wrong. I don't honestly know that she hasn't. But she is my friend, and I am going to help her if I can. What I don't understand is why you cannot do the same. Anyone with eyes and half a mind could see that her feelings for you were genuine. I thought yours for her were as well."

"This is a bed entirely of her own making," Niles said coldly. "She may now lie in it ... alone."

"You are callous and cruel," his sister told him. "Fine. If that is how you feel, if you choose to allow your emotions to be covered by your pride, then she would be well rid of you."

"You would do best to put as much distance between the Blaynes and yourself as possible. When this sour stink hits the open air, it may taint your name as well."

Angel's mouth compressed into a tight and angry line. "Don't worry yourself about me. However this crisis ends, I will have no trouble holding my head up in society nor living with myself afterward. I doubt you'll be able to say the same." She snapped about, her skirts flying out behind her, and marched back into the sitting room. "You, sir, may show yourself to the door!"

This time, she had no problem whatever in slamming the door hard enough to rattle the picture frames on the walls.

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CHAPTER TWELVE

Lady Cavendish was resplendent in an autumn gown of amber and red. The ball room was awash in lights and paper streamers. Guests were laughing, the music was playing brightly, and Penelope felt positively sick to her stomach.

The axe that was the withdrawal of Niles' marriage proposal had hung over her head all week, and the uncertainty of when it might fall kept echoing through her mind. In all that time, there had not been a word from him. It was all that Penelope could do to keep from dropping into a heap on the ballroom floor and bursting into tears. She both wanted to see him and dreaded the inevitable moment when she would have to, to see her worst fears as the truth when she looked into his eyes and realized the truth: that she had irrevocably destroyed his love for her. That he despised her now. That her sin was so great that she could not be redeemed, not even by a spanking. Or two. Or a hundred. All of which she would cheerfully have submitted to, if only she could undo what she had done.

Unfortunately, Niles had not been waiting for her when her Aunt's carriage had pulled up to the Cavendish front steps.

"Maybe he hasn't yet arrived," Anstice had suggested.

But even that small self-deluding hope was quickly proven false when they walked inside and Penelope spotted Niles and Angel both, albeit on opposite ends of the room. Angel seemed to be waiting for them; Niles, on the other hand, seemed to be thoroughly enjoying himself as he danced in the

arms of young and very slender Katherine, one of the Season's newest debutantes barely released from the Blankenship's nursery into polite Society.

Katherine was blushing, coyly batting her eyes and gazing up at him through her lashes. If Niles objected to her flirtations, then he certainly hid his irritation well.

And there, in the very back of the room by the garden doors, was Stawel. He had already helped himself at the refreshment bar, and he raised the drink he held in his hand to her in a silent, mocking toast. Penelope shivered.

A touch at her shoulder startled her and Penelope spun around to find Angel there at her elbow.

"How are you holding up?" Lady Townshend asked.

Penelope glanced to her other side, but Lord Wentworth had already arrived to spirit Anstice away for a waltz and Aunt Agatha was deep in conversation with two of her closest friends. Penelope turned back to Angel. "As good as can be expected, I suppose, considering the circumstances."

"You'll be all right," Angel said. "I'm going to help you."

Beckoning with two fingers, she led Penelope into the anteroom, usually reserved for the ladies wraps. She glanced both left and right, making sure they had disappeared unnoticed, and then she shut the door.

"I was up all night," she whispered furtively. "But I do believe I have a plan. We're going to frame Stawel."

"Frame him!"

"Absolutely," Angel said grimly. "It'll be a pleasure to teach that wretch a lesson. I guarantee it'll be one he'll not soon forget!"

"But how?" Penelope asked.

"When are you supposed to meet with him?"

"Midnight. In the library."

"He's going to get more than he bargained for," Angel predicted, drawing herself up proudly. "He's going to get me!"

"What are you going to do?"

"I am going to scream." Angel smiled. "That should bring everyone running. At least I hope it will. I will tell them I saw Stawel, with the necklace in his hand, accosting you in the hall and dragging you into the library."

"But—but what if he says I took it?" Penelope cried. "Who would believe me over him?"

To which Angel countered, "I do not know, but I will tell you this much. There is no one who would believe him over me. Trust me." Angel patted her shoulder. "This will work. Particularly if you suggest that he'd been drinking too much and wanted you to flee with him off to parts unknown to start a new life. You can say he told you he'd taken something which would allow the two of you to live quite happily for a long, long time. Just make sure he has the necklace on him before all that."

"Either way," Penelope said glumly, "I still have to steal that necklace."

Angel patted her shoulder. "Don't worry. I've taken care of that part, too. Lady Cavendish is well aware of what is going to happen tonight."

Penelope's jaw dropped. "What?! Lady Townshed, please don't think I am unappreciative, but have you gone mad?"

"Trust me. She'll keep out secret. I've told her there is a jewelry thief among us." Angel took Penelope's hands and gave them a comforting squeeze. "Lady Cavendish has agreed to leave her necklace out for the taking."

Penelope shook her head, dumbfounded. "But if she knows then how can I sneak from the room without her knowing it was me who took it?"

"I've already told her that you are my accomplice. She thinks you are going to watch over her necklace to be sure we catch the thief before he leaves the house. In times like this, we ladies must band together. And believe you me, when it comes to thievery, blunt honest is truly for the best." Angel gave her hands another squeeze and then said, "Now come, before people begin to wonder where we've gone."

Angel slipped from the anteroom back into the ballroom, leaving Penelope feeling both relieved to have a plan of action now, but yet also oddly enough a little bit worse than when she'd started this in the first place. Blunt honesty. Certainly, had she trusted to that in the first place than none of the rest of this would ever have come about.

Stifling a sigh, Penelope forced herself to leave the quiet sanctity of the room and rejoin the rest of Lady Cavendish's guests in the ballroom. Her eyes couldn't help but seek out Niles, who was dancing with yet another wallflower. For only the barest of seconds, their gazes met. Then he looked away, as if he had never seen her.

Penelope could have cried, but Stawel didn't give her the chance to succumb to self-pity.

"A beautiful girl like you," he said, appearing at her elbow, "has no business sitting out a waltz."

Penelope faced him, her fear of what he could do to her giving way to anger. "If you touch me, I will scream. Then everyone would see you for the monster you are."

"And hasten your own family's demise?" he questioned, arching a knowing brow. "No, I doubt if you'd be so foolish." He took her hand and lead her out onto the dance floor.

With her only recourse being to cause a scene, Penelope reluctantly danced with him. She kept him at arms' length, however. Her elbows unbending, her back as stiff as a board, and she didn't care one whit if her face betrayed her revulsion.

Stawel tsked. "You should at least attempt to pretend to enjoy my company. Who knows, you may find yourself with no other future prospects but myself. Worming your way into my good graces now can only serve to help you later on."

"I would sooner take my own life than allow that to happen," she told him flatly. With a tiny pang of irony, she remembered having said the same thing to Niles at one time, sharing a waltz much as she was with Stawel. The only difference between then and now being, this time, she was fairly certain that she could follow through with her grim threat.

"You know," he said, his tone one of painstaking politeness, his face as cold as ice. "Someone really should teach you some manners someday. If you're not careful, that someone might just be me."

The dance ended and Stawel bowed before her, his eyes remaining locked on her own. Then he walked away.

* * * *

The evening dragged on like a nightmare, slow and inescapable, forcing her from one hour into the next until she knew she had no other choice. The time had come for Lady Robin Hood to strike one last time. At twenty minutes to midnight, Niles was no where to be seen, and neither was Angel. There was only Stawel, smiling that hideous knowing smile of his, and Penelope had never felt so alone in all of her life.

With a silent prayer for forgiveness, Penelope allowed her friend Reeves to lead her out on the dance floor.

"You are feeling all right tonight?" Reeves asked, as he took her into his arms.

"Oh yes," she lied. "I am fine." She even managed a smile for his benefit.

"You don't look fine," he noticed out loud. "In fact," he peered into her face. "You look a little sad."

"I am a little tired. It has been a dreadfully long Season."

Reeves beamed in understanding. "The nights can certainly be long this time of year. There are so many routs, one hardly knows where to assign one's time. I rarely get home before dawn any more. And yet, as tired as I become, every year it still saddens me when the Season ends and Society is once more retired to the country." His eyes slid across the room to where Anne waited beside her mama, watching him.

He smiled when she waved, and Penelope slipped the hem of her gown beneath his foot.

Lady Cavendish must have been watching for her to do something, for barely had Reeves escorted her off the dance floor, sputtering apologies all the way, than did she appear out of the crowd.

"Miss Blayne," she exclaimed. "Gracious me, your poor gown!"

"I hate to ask," Penelope told her, falling easily into the opening Lady Cavendish and Angel had contrived, "but I seem to be in need of needle and thread."

Lady Cavendish looked obligingly at her skirt and told the red-faced Reeves, as she took Penelope by the arm, "Never fear, young man. We'll have this dress back into dancing shape in no time."

Reeves heaved a morose sigh. "Tis a wonder they allow me on the dance floor at all." Bowing his head, he clasped his hands behind his back and headed back to the matron mamas' where Anne was patiently waiting for him beside her mother.

Ten minutes later, Penelope found herself in Lady Cavendish's sitting room, on the verge of being all by herself.

"How very brave you are, my dear," Lady Cavendish told her. "In your position, I would be a nervous wreck! I would be terrified. To meet an actual jewel thief. A blackguard bent on extortion. A rogue." She gave a delicate shiver.

Afraid she might have to give a romanticized version of Stawel's treachery, Penelope turned away. The famous Cavendish diamond necklace was laying out in the open for

her, resting on top of a velvet cloth on her hostess's dressing table. She reached down to touch the cold stones, sparkling under the lights of the room. "Aren't you afraid these might be lost?"

Lady Cavendish beamed a smile. "Not at all, dear. Angel has assured me that the situation is full in hand. There is no way my necklace shall make it out of the house. And even if it does, they are only rocks." Lady Cavendish cupped Penelope's shoulders and leaned in to buss her cheek with a kiss. "Take care not to be hurt, dear. That is by far the most important thing."

Penelope was both ashamed of her nefarious behavior and humbled by her would-be victim's concern. And then she was left alone. Knowing she didn't have much time left, she slipped the necklace into her pocket and then sat down at the dresser to fix her torn hem.

When she was sure the gown would survive the damage done it, Penelope crept to the door and cracked it open. A shape moved at the opposite end of the hall, but it was only a maid carrying a small stack of pressed sheets to another room. She waited a few seconds until the woman turned a corner and was gone, then Penelope threw open the door and hurried back the way she and Lady Cavendish had come. She ran lightly down the stairs, but instead of rejoining the party, she turned the other direction and made her way to the library.

As she pushed the heavy door open, the clock upon the mantel began to strike midnight. The room was dark and empty, lit only by the distant lamps that surrounded the front

of the house and drifted in secondhand through the open window. The lacy curtains fluttered in the darkness and a shadowy figure stood up from the chair at the Cavendish desk. Penelope froze, her heart leaping into her throat, until she heard Stawel's lazy drawl, "Well, well, well. Twelve o'clock exactly. I do so enjoy a punctual woman."

He came around the desk, seating himself upon the front edge and folding his arms across his chest even as he stretched his long legs before him and crossed his ankles.

"Come in," he told her softly. "Close the door. This would be a very bad time for either of us to attract any outside attention."

Her heart pounding hard inside her, Penelope nevertheless did as he directed, slipping inside the library and gently closing the door. There was a flicker of light from behind her as Stawel lit a lamp on the desk, and Penelope pulled the heavy necklace from her skirt pocket even as she turned around to face him.

"You got it," Stawel said, the ready smile up on his lips widening as she lifted the sparkling diamond necklace into the light. "I must confess, I did have my doubts that you would go through with the crime."

He held out his hand expectantly and, reluctantly, Penelope crossed the room to lay the jewelry into his waiting hand. Stawel turned towards the lamp, watching as the sparkling stones became like dancing fire in his hands.

"Our association is done then," Penelope said flatly.

"Oh my dear," he murmured, admiring his prize with greedy pleasure. "Our association has only just begun."

"On the contrary," Niles said from just behind her, his deep and angry tone sending Penelope's heart plummeting all the way down to her toes. She spun around, clutching her chest as he said, "I don't believe I shall allow my wife to have anything more to do with the likes of you."

"L-Lord Granville," she gasped, and for the barest few seconds, his angry gaze settled upon her.

The door opened behind him and Lady Cavendish wandered in. "Miss Blayne, have you..."

She stopped when she saw Granville and Stawel, and then her necklace still dangling in Stawel's hand. "Mr. Stawel! What are you doing?"

"I do believe he has stolen your diamonds," Niles told her, glaring at Penelope.

He was going to keep her secret. Penelope's bottom lip began to wobble. But at what cost? She had still lost him. She could see it in his hardened eyes.

"You are the thief?!" Lady Cavendish demanded, her hands flying to her meaty hips. "You cad! To steal from your peers, you have proved yourself unworthy of our friendship and our trust! I should have believed Lady Townshead when she first told me there was a thief among us, but I never thought it would be you!"

A flash of steel startled Penelope an instant before she felt his arm lock around her shoulders. She stiffened with a shriek as she was yanked back against Stawel's chest.

"No!" Niles started towards them, absolutely dark with fury but stopped abruptly even as Penelope felt the sharpened

point of a steel letter opener pricking the side of her throat.
"Let her go!"

"Stay right where you are," Stawel told him.

Niles froze where he was, but the look on his face was murderous.

"Thank God your mother died before she could see you come to this!" Lady Cavendish cried. "How could you be so cruel?"

"Get away from the door," he told her. He started to push Penelope towards the exit, but Niles stepped sideways into their path.

"Let her go, and I will let you leave."

Stawel pressed the knife harder against her skin, until Penelope gasped, afraid to swallow lest she be cut. "You'll let me go now."

"Not with her, I won't."

Penelope felt Stawel's arm tighten around her shoulders and she saw Niles tense. For a moment, she thought he was going to charge Stawel, but then the library door suddenly swung open and Angel, Aunt Agatha and Anstice walked inside. They all three froze, wide-eyed, and stared at Stawel, who hugged Penelope to him even tighter.

He growled, "I am not going to hang for this." And the knife gouged into Penelope's throat. She felt the steel slice into her skin, felt the hot trickle of blood begin to wind down her throat, and for the first time in all her life, knowing she was about to die, Penelope fainted.

* * * *

Niles leapt at Stawel when Penelope suddenly fell limp in his embrace, knocking her captor off balance. But instead of struggling with the dead weight of the unconscious girl, Stawel fell with her to the ground, sitting on top of her with the knife still held to her neck.

"I'll cut her!" he shouted at Niles, who again stopped, afraid to come any closer lest Stawel follow through with his threat. More than anything, he wanted to grab Penelope and pull her to safety. Even more than he wanted to hit Stawel.

"Oh my goodness gracious!" Angel quickly covered her mouth with her hand and took a step back.

But Aunt Agatha, the voice of infinite calm and reason, said, "Young man, get that blade off my niece's throat."

"I am not going to hang for this," Stawel said coldly.

"Of course not," she replied, and slowly began to walk toward him. She lay her hand on Niles' shoulder and pushed him back a pace. "No one has said anything about hanging."

"I won't go to prison either."

"I am sure we can make arrangement that will be satisfactory on all sides of this problem," Aunt Agatha said.

"He has my diamonds," Lady Cavendish said.

"He can give them back, can't you?" the older woman asked.

Stawel smirked. "Not likely."

"If it's money you want, young man, then I will be more than happy to give you some. Enough to make a new life for yourself somewhere else."

"Far away from here," Lady Cavendish added. "I, for one, will make sure that you are never welcomed anywhere in London ever again!"

"You'd let me go," Stawel asked disbelievingly. He glared at Niles, whose expression remained as dark as a thundercloud and yet who said nothing.

"Be grateful that we held your mother in such high regard," Aunt Agatha told him. "Otherwise we might not be making this same offer."

Stawel slowly pulled the knife from Penelope's throat, still watching Niles carefully as he straightened and stood up. He backed towards the door, the knife held ever at the ready as if expecting to be pounced upon at any second.

However, the instant he left Penelope, Niles went to her, dropping to his knees and pulling her into his arms. Stawel sneered at the pretty scene, but he made no parting comment. As the women backed from the door, he made his escape without another word.

"My necklace," Lady Cavendish sighed.

"Penelope!" Anstice cried, racing to her sister's side. She dropped down onto her knees, searching her pockets for a handkerchief to dab at the blood. "Is she going to be all right? Oh dear, is she dead?"

Lightly slapping Penelope's cheeks, Niles said, "Penny? Penny, my darling, open your eyes."

"I can see her breathing," Aunt Agatha said, hovering over them. "She's probably just fainted."

"Being pricked like that would naturally do that," Lady Cavendish interjected. "Why, I would be nothing but a puddle

on the floor at the first sight of a knife, much less having one held at my throat. Can you imagine? Lady Wainwright, your niece has nerves of steel!"

Niles continued to slap at her cheeks, and eventually Penelope uttered a low moan, turning her head to one side and then the other.

As Penelope's eyes fluttered open, Aunt Agatha touched Anstice's shoulder. "Come along, girl. Let's go."

"Go?" Anstice echoed. "B-but ... what about Penelope?"

Niles met the old woman's eyes. "Feeling as I do right now," he warned, "You might not want to leave her with me."

Aunt Agatha faintly smiled. "Young man, I do believe she is in very good hands."

She herded both her niece, Niles' sister, and their hostess back out into the hall. As the library door closed softly shut behind the women, Niles looked back down at the woman cradled in his arms.

"Lord Granville," she whispered.

"I prefer Niles," he said.

Penelope's eyes began to tear. "How can you hold me? How can you look at me, knowing what I've done?"

Shaking his head, he caressed her face. "Are you all right?"

"Yes." Sniffling, she sat up carefully. She touched her throat, but the cut there was very small and the blood fast on its way to drying. "Yes, I think I am."

"Good." Both his gentle touch and his solicitous expression vanished and Niles took hold of her arm in a no nonsense

grip. He hauled her to her feet, completely ignoring her soft cry as he dragged her back to the desk.

"What are you doing? Unhand me! How—" she gasped sharply when he seated himself at the desk, making a very threatening lap. "Oh no! Nonono! Niles, you can't!"

One good strong pull had her flopping down like a cumbersome sack of grain across his thighs. He caught her by the waist and one thigh, heaving her bottom until it was centered for a proper paddling. "By all means, cry as much as you like, but bear in mind, the louder you are, the more people will likely come running to witness your punishment."

That silenced her; Penelope barely even gasped when he raised her skirts, baring the seat of her knickers.

"I have already purchased all the jewelry you've stolen, my lady Robin Hood," he addressed the back of her head, catching and pinning back her wrist as she darted one hand back to cover her upturned bottom protectively. "You are going to return every single one of them and you are never—" he raised his open hand high over her clenching buttocks and brought it down with a loud, hard smack, the first of dozens more just like it, "*—never* to take anything that does not belong to you again! Is that clear?!"

"Yes!" Penelope cried out, but her acquiescence had come by far too late to save her. Niles spanked her bucking and writhing bottom until he could swear he saw the cherry red hue of her skin right through the thin white cloth of her knickers. Until his own palm were smarting and stinging, although he knew each hardy wallop had to be hurting her a

good deal worse if her tearful wails were anything by which to judge.

And even when he did eventually stop, it was only to catch the back of her knickers and drag them off the hot surface of her bottom and down the backs of her thighs to her knees.

"Nooo!" Penelope squealed, kicking her feet and covering her mouth in an effort to both fight his hold and yet fight it quietly. "Please! I promise, I won't ever do this again! Please don't spank me any more!"

Niles shook his head. "For the thievery, no. I won't. This," he turned his attention back to her now bare bottom, the entire surface of which was a blazing hot shade of scarlet. "This is for the lies. And if you know what's good for you, my errant miss, you'll never tell me another for as long as you live!"

His palm came cracking down with a crisp snap that put the vigor back into her kicks. Her cries took on a renewed pitch of urgency and her fight to get back up off his lap turned frantic. It was without a doubt the hardest and longest spanking he'd ever given in all his life, and she was sobbing breathlessly before he was done. Smack after smack, his hand rose and fell until she was drooped like a wilted flower over his knees, her strength to fight was completely exhausted, and her ability to form even the simplest pleading 'no' was too overwhelmed by the pain and her own consuming remorse.

She would not be able to sit down, not for days. Her bottom was a swollen patchwork of reddish purplish blotches from the top of her buttocks to the very base where the

fleshy mounds melted into the seam of her thighs. But as he brought his aching hand to rest upon her wounded backside, he knew that as severe as the punishment had been without a doubt it had fit the magnitude of her crimes.

And as lost in pain as she was, Penelope must have agreed, for when he let her up she made no effort to get away from him. Instead, she launched herself into his arms, scrabbling with renewed franticness to press herself into his embrace.

She held her bottom with one hand, clinging to him with the other and sobbing into his shoulder. She felt so good there, holding onto him as if for dear life. Niles rocked her gently, stroking her golden hair and whispering nonsensical words of comfort which she probably wasn't even capable of hearing just yet. In fact, the only thing she seemed to be aware of was his arms around her.

"Hold me," she wept. "Hold me."

He tightened his arms around her, hugging her as tightly to him as he could until her tears gradually began to abate. Even then she still did not let him go, though she did turn her face to rest her head upon his shoulder.

"I'll bet the real Robin Hood never had to worry about getting spanked for his crimes," she sniffled, accepting the handkerchief he handed to her.

"No," he smiled, gently stroking her back. "But I'll bet Maid Marion lived in perpetual fear of Sherwood Forest's plentiful switches."

She both giggled and blew her nose, quite effectively making his handkerchief her own from that instant on. "I

suppose you think me very wicked now and will want nothing more to do with me."

"Not wicked," Niles corrected, shaking his head. "Just misguided and foolish. You realize, of course, there is only one solution for what you've done."

Penelope bowed her head.

"You're going to have to marry me," Niles said.

Startled, Penelope pulled back to look at him. "Marry you?"

"I've got a fortune with which you can be as philanthropic as you wish. And after you've spent every last penny making the world a kinder place, if you are still desirous of adventure and excitement, instead of robbing from the rich, Penny my darling," he bent to kiss the tip of her little red nose, "we can travel."
