



# DEVIL'S HONOR

DEBRA DIER

## Chapter One

*London, 1816*

“I cannot promise His Grace will see you this morning, Miss Darracott. Last night was...” The butler lifted one bushy white brow. “Last night was a particularly exhausting evening for His Grace. But I will do my best to impart the urgency of your request.”

Isabel Darracott gave the elderly retainer the same smile that had won her admittance past two footmen and into the Duke of Marlow’s London town house. “Thank you. I trust you shall not fail me.”

“I will do my best, Miss Darracott.”

Isabel sagged against the back of a leather chair after the butler closed the library door. She could only imagine how the Duke would take the news of her uninvited appearance in London, especially after he had experienced an exhausting evening. He probably suffered from gout, as many men on the shady side of fifty did. He would probably be furious with her. Somehow the idea to confront the Duke had seemed a great deal less threatening when she planned this at home.

Silently she chided herself. She was four and twenty, far too old to act missish. She forced starch into her back and drew in a deep breath, catching the soft scent of leather from the morocco-covered chairs and sofas. “I have every right to be here,” she whispered, trying to prop up her sagging courage.

Indeed, the Duke ought to be ashamed of his actions. Still, she could not stop feeling a country mouse about to do battle with a lion. She smoothed her hand over the wrinkles in her apple green wool pelisse. Nine hours riding in a crowded mail coach did not do much for a woman’s appearance.

She hurried toward a pier glass on the mahogany-paneled wall above the fireplace, hoping to improve her appearance before her first encounter with the elusive Duke. If she could only convince him to—

“Dear heaven!” Isabel froze, her breath halting in her throat at the sight that greeted her near the hearth. A man lay sprawled on his side on the carpet near one of the sofas. His left hand was flung out toward the fireplace, resting against the burgundy and ivory carpet, palm up, long elegantly tapered fingers curled inward.

She stepped closer, approaching him as warily as she would a wild animal that might bite. He was tall, his long legs encased in close-fitting black wool trousers. He certainly was not one of the servants. She might not be acquainted with London fashion, but she recognized expensive cloth and expert tailoring when she saw it. The Duke had two sons. She suspected the man lying on the floor might be one of them. Still, why was he sleeping on the floor of the library?

He shifted, rolling onto his back with a lazy growl. His white shirt spilled open all the way to the stitching half way down his chest, drawing her attention to the black curls shading his skin. It certainly was not proper to notice a man’s physique. Yet this man demanded her attention. Since there was no one to notice her impolite stare, she indulged herself.

He was so starkly masculine, so splendidly proportioned—broad across the shoulders and chest, with a lean waist and narrow hips. How any man could manage to look commanding while sleeping on the floor, she didn’t know. But this man definitely managed. Even in repose he radiated a barely restrained aura of power.

“Are you all right?” she asked softly.

He twitched his nose, his only response. She knelt beside him, with every intention of making certain he wasn’t injured in some way. He certainly did not appear injured. He seemed to be sleeping as peacefully as a babe in a cradle.

Odd, simmering warmth rippled through her as she absorbed every detail of his features. Black waves of hair, overly long, framed a face sculpted with bold lines and curves—a fine, straight nose, sharply chiseled cheekbones, and full lips that lent a moody expression to his countenance. Thick black lashes rested against his cheeks; the color of his eyes was a mystery. The night had painted his lean cheeks with an enticing shadow of beard. Surrendering to a wayward nudge from her curiosity, she touched his cheek, just a graze, a soft brush of her fingertips against that fascinating rasp of black stubble.

He stirred, a low growl emanating from deep in his chest. She snatched back her hand as he opened eyes the color of an ocean at sunrise, grey and green blending with a startling beauty. The heat of her rising blush shimmered across her skin. “I hope I did not disturb you.”

He blinked, as though trying to bring her face into focus. A lazy smile curved those sensual lips, transforming a handsome face into a devastating weapon.

All the moisture evaporated from her mouth. She was suddenly aware of how awkward the situation truly was. No doubt he would think her rather bold. “You must be curious to find a stranger at your side. You see, I am here to...” Oh my goodness, it was terribly difficult to think while looking into those eyes. “Ah, I was waiting for...”

Her words dissolved in a squeak as he wrapped his powerful arms around her and pulled her down against his

hard chest. Before she could utter more than a startled gasp, he captured her lips with his.

He moved his lips against hers, firm, demanding, as though he could not get enough of her. She gasped against his lips. He plunged his tongue into her mouth. Through the shock ripping through her she recognized a faint taste of brandy in his kiss. He moved his head, his beard rasping against her soft cheeks. At the country assemblies and house parties she had attended, never once had she met a man who had aroused her interest. Desire had been nothing more than a word read in books, a concept contemplated on dreamy afternoons, a curiosity she wondered if she would ever understand—until this moment.

Even in her innocence she recognized the swift tide sweeping over her as that most intriguing of emotions. Although she considered herself practical in most aspects of her life—since practicality had become a necessity after her mother’s death—she had never completely abandoned her girlish dreams of romance and passion, a love so powerful it would set her world on end. A love that sparked legends. She had read about such things in books. She had dreamed about such wonders at night. She had feared she would live her entire life and never taste desire. Yet this was desire, raw hunger, unrestrained passion. Dear heaven, she could not breathe.

He rolled with her in his arms, pinning her against the thick wool carpet. The weight of his big body pressed against her. Powerful muscles shifted against her breasts, her belly, her legs, each touch a confirmation of potent masculinity. His scent—sandalwood soap and an intriguing musk that defied identification—flooded her senses. The heat of his body soaked through the layers of their clothes.

Through the heated rush of blood through her veins she recognized all the reasons she could not allow this liberty. She struggled beneath him, pushing against his broad shoulders. Yet he didn’t seem to notice or care. Instead of releasing her, he slipped one hand between their bodies and caressed her breast. She stiffened at the bold touch. Through wool and muslin her skin tingled at the warmth of his hand on her. He squeezed the sensitive tip between his fingers, sending sensation shooting through her. She gasped against his mouth. In desperation, she swung her reticule, smacking the side of his head. That caught his attention.

“What the bloody hell!” He pulled away from her.

Isabel scrambled away from him, tripping over her skirt as she came to her feet. She caught the back of a chair and steadied herself.

He sat on his heels, rubbing the side of his head, glaring at her. “Why the devil did you do that?”

She drew a shaky breath. Her body was trembling so badly her voice quavered when she spoke. “It seemed the only way to convince you to stop attacking me.”

He rose, his movements filled with the powerful grace of a born athlete. “Attacking you?”

She touched her lips, feeling the soft tingling there. She could not quell the trembling of her limbs. She felt as though he had pushed her from a rather high height and she had just managed to survive the fall. “Are you going to deny you attacked me?”

“What the hell do you expect? Bothering a man while he is sleeping.”

She bristled at his continued vulgarity. “Are you in the habit of sleeping in the library?”

“I sleep where I bloody well choose.” He frowned, his grey-green gaze raking her from the top of her green velvet bonnet to the tips of her black half boots. “Who the devil are you? And what the hell are you doing in my house?”

She met his brusque demand with a direct look she hoped would disguise the trembling in her limbs. She pulled together as much dignity as she could manage. “I am Miss Darracott and I am waiting to see my guardian, the Duke of Marlow.”

“Your guardian?” He looked surprised, and then a glint of humor lit his stunning eyes. “Clay put you up to this, didn’t he? His idea of revenge for that tart I sent him last week.”

“I have no idea what you are talking about. My visit has nothing at all to do with baked goods.”

He lifted his brows. “Baked goods?”

“I realize I must appear a bit disheveled, but I have not come from a shop. And I have nothing at all to do with the tart you sent your brother. I can only assume it was gooseberry, since they tend to be a bit sour.”

He nodded. “I have never cared for gooseberry tarts.”

Isabel folded her hands at her waist, her reticule dangling from her wrist. “I am Miss Darracott, the daughter of Edward, the late Baron Bramsleigh. And if I did not need to speak with my guardian, I would not stay another moment in your company.”

He studied her a moment, his lips curving into a lazy smile. “So you are here to speak with your *guardian*, the Duke of Marlow.”

She really didn’t like the glint in his eyes. “The butler has gone to announce my arrival to the Duke. I expect he will return directly.”

He moved toward her in slow strides she suspected were designed to make her wonder what would happen when he reached her. It worked. She took a step back, and bumped into the back of a chair. Unless she wanted to run past him like a frightened schoolgirl, she was trapped. He drew near. She held her shaky ground.

In spite of her every attempt to quell her attraction to the rogue, her skin tingled with the same excitement she had

experienced earlier when she lay pinned beneath him. He stepped so close his legs pressed against her pelisse. Far too close. Certainly no gentleman, even in London, would stand so close to a lady. Yet this man evidently followed his own rules.

She lifted her chin. "You are being quite impertinent."

He lifted one thick black brow. "Am I?"

"Yes," she said, her voice escaping in a thread of breath.

He leaned forward. She leaned back. Yet she couldn't put enough space between them to satisfy propriety or her sense of survival. A warm scent of sandalwood soap drifted from his skin and swirled through her senses. The warmth of his body radiated through the layers of their clothing, tempting her to lean into that warmth. She stared up at his handsome face, her heart pounding against her ribs while a voice in her head screamed *Run!*

"Where did my brother find you?" he asked, his breath warming her cheek with a moist heat colored with a trace of brandy. "At Covent Garden?"

"I have never met your brother. And if he is as disagreeable as you, I hope I never have the occasion to meet him. I have come here to speak with my guardian. I doubt the Duke will appreciate the way you have behaved toward me."

He slid his hand around her neck, his long fingers pressing against her nape. "Come now, my sweet. We both know I am Marlow. And I am certainly not your guardian."

"What?" Shock speared through her at his words. "You cannot possibly be Marlow."

"You are not the only one with those sentiments. Unfortunately there is no hope for the situation."

Isabel stared up at him, searching for some sign of deceit in his eyes, finding nothing but a blunt truthfulness. "You are the Duke's eldest son?"

He laughed softly, a dark sound filled with an odd note of self-mockery. "Justin Hayward Peyton Trevelyan at your service."

The blood drained from her limbs. "And you mean to say something has happened to your father?"

"Even he could not command the hands of fate, or the course of his disease."

Isabel closed her eyes, blocking out the compelling image of his face, snatching desperately for a slender thread of hope. "You are hoaxing me. Are you not?"

"Hoaxing you?"

She looked up at him. "Please tell me you really are not the Duke of Marlow."

"That would be a lie. And I do not tolerate lies of any kind. I am the Duke of Marlow, Marquess of Angelstone, Earl of Basingstoke, Baron of Campden, Trowbridge, and Arden. Now may we end this little farce?"

Isabel swallowed hard. No matter how much she wanted to deny the truth, it stared at her from a pair of exquisite grey-green eyes. "You really are Marlow."

"I have been since my worthy sire died nine months ago."

"What a complete disaster."

"I am certain he thought it was." He pressed his fingers against the back of her neck, urging her upward toward his lips. "Now, where were we before you interrupted me? Ah, yes, I believe I was about to make love to you."

His dark voice coiled around her like a magnetic current, coaxing her near. She pressed back against the tall wing-back chair. He leaned closer. The warmth of his body beckoned her, promising more of the tingling excitement she had found in his wicked embrace. Desire slithered through her like a fiery serpent, leaving a trail of steam in its wake, threatening to melt her brain. "Take your hands off of me," she said, appalled at the breathless sound of her voice.

He brushed his lips against the tip of her nose. "I must come to see you onstage sometime. You play the wounded innocent to perfection."

She pushed against his chest. It was like trying to move a granite statue. "Oh let me go, you big brute."

He smiled, his full lips tipping into a crooked grin. "How long do you plan to play this little game?"

"Stand aside." She kept her voice low, speaking to him the way a lady would address a peasant.

"As you wish, *milady*." He stepped aside and executed an exaggerated bow.

She put several feet between them before she turned to face him. "I realize it is too much to hope any logic will pierce that thick skull of yours, but circumstances demand I try."

Marlow leaned back against the chair, folded his arms over his chest and grinned at her. "I can think of better things to do."

"You obviously believe I am here for some nefarious purpose. I assure you, I am not a lady of easy virtue sent as a diversion by anyone, including your brother. I am Miss Darracott. My father, Lord Edward Darracott, Baron Bramsleigh, died nine months ago, leaving your father as my guardian, as well as the guardian of my two younger sisters."

"I shall have to come up with a truly inventive way of showing Clay how much I appreciate this little play of his."

"You are being quite infuriating." She clenched her hands into fists at her sides, clutching for her composure. "I am not an actress. And I have never met your brother."

“Is there a second act to this play? Because I am becoming rather bored with this one.”

“Do you not see the implication? You could very well be—” She broke off, unable to voice the unspeakable thought. “Oh this is a disaster. A complete disaster.”

Marlow frowned, his expression growing uneasy. “You are not going to start weeping, are you? I haven’t much patience for women who turn into watering pots. You can end the performance on this note and be on your way.”

Isabel forced her back to stiffen. “Obviously I cannot make you see reason. I intend to see your attorney, Mr. Yardley. Perhaps, under the circumstances, the situation can be rectified. And I need never see you again. We can only hope that is the case.”



## Chapter Two

Justin leaned back against the chair, watching the woman march across the room, while he tried to ignore the heat simmering low in his belly. He wanted nothing more than to toss the tart on her lovely backside and finish what they had started. Still, he had never chased a woman in his life. He was not about to start now. Even if the creature in question was one of the most intriguing females he had ever encountered—a tart who looked and sounded like a starchy governess. The type of handsome young governess who inspired all manner of wicked thoughts in the heads of young boys. He had never had that type of governess. He wished to God he had. No, his father had chosen a tutor for his sons, a man straight out of the fiery pits of hell.

A thick lock of hair had fallen free of her anchoring pins. The glossy, golden brown coil swayed with each step she took, brushing her green pelisse right where the small of her back was hidden from his sight. Images rose in his mind—soft brown hair sliding over the sleek curves of this woman’s bare back, smooth white sheets beneath the slide of creamy skin, slim bare arms sliding around his neck, drawing him down into her warmth. Lust jabbed low in his belly, a sharp stab he tried to ignore.

She turned at the door, her chin lifted at a defiant angle. “Good day, Duke.”

Odd, she had not addressed him as *Your Grace*. Only a person of rank would address him in this manner. Innocent indignation shone in eyes as blue as his childhood dreams of heaven. A maiden’s blush painted her smooth cheeks a dusky rose. If he didn’t know better he would have believed she was every bit as innocent as she appeared. He had to admit, she was an excellent actress.

“Come back again, sweetheart. When you are in the mood for some real entertainment.”

“One day you will regret those words.” She closed the door behind her with a soft click. A very lady-like exit for a woman at the height of her anger. Not at all what he had expected. Nothing about this woman was anything he expected.

Justin had to compliment his brother. Clayton had devised an ingenious means of revenge on his wicked brother for the tart Justin had sent him the other day.

He sat on the arm of the chair and contemplated the woman’s performance. She had never broken from character, not once. And her kiss held such innocence. Her lips had fluttered beneath his, as though she had never before felt the slow slide of a man’s lips over hers. She had trembled beneath him, as though she found him exciting and frightening all at the same moment. All in all it had been a masterful performance.

*If it was a performance.*

An icy sensation brushed the nape of his neck. It had to be a performance. It was absurd to think her story was true. He certainly could not have inherited the guardianship of anyone, especially not three innocent females. His father never would have sanctioned Justin’s guardianship of a mongrel. He certainly would not have turned over the lives of three innocent females into the keeping of his profligate son. Unless he was trying to teach Justin a lesson.

A suspicion took hold of Justin, a dreadful thought that gripped his heart like a cold, ghostly hand. His father had always been keen on trying to force his eldest son into a mold of his own fashioning. Justin had never read his father’s will. He had been in Italy when his father died, and he had stayed out of the country through the proper period of mourning. Donning black for George William Justin Emory Trevelyan was not something he had cared to do. It spat in the eye of honesty, something Justin abhorred.

These past few weeks, since returning to England, Justin had avoided every attempt Sophia, Clay, or Yardley had made to discuss the terms of his father’s will. Justin didn’t give a damn what his father had bequeathed his eldest son. He suspected the entailments were the only reason his father had not disinherited him completely. Everyone knew Clay would be the more worthy successor to the title. Justin had not taken anything from his father except the titles, and he had done so only to appease his grandmother, the Dowager Duchess.

Could part of his inheritance include a blue-eyed temptress and her two sisters? It would be a cruel blow, something his father just might do to teach his final lesson from beyond the grave.

Justin stood, his heart pounding against the wall of his chest. Perhaps it was time to see just exactly what was in his father’s will.

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The fragrance of rose potpourri mingled with the sharp scent of burning coal in the green drawing room of Marlow House in Park Lane. After his father’s death, Justin had seen no reason to use his father’s London residence. Instead, he had insisted the elegant mansion fall under his grandmother’s control. Sophia had moved from her home in Berkeley Square to the huge house to make certain it was maintained properly. He stood beside the carved grey marble mantel, facing his grandmother, tense with the realization of the disaster that had befallen him. “Did you know about this?”

“Of course I knew about this.”

Sophia, the Dowager Duchess of Marlow, sat near the hearth on a gilt trimmed sofa. She was one of those rare women who made a mockery of the passage of time. Tall and slender, she had golden blond hair that revealed only a glimmer of brass from the artful hand of her hairdresser. With classically carved features and brilliant blue eyes, her

handsome face still captured the attention of many gentlemen, including the Marquess of Hempstead, a man of nine and fifty who was her current lover.

“Lord Edward Darracott, Baron Bramsleigh, and your father were friends since their days at Harrow. In fact, dear Edward was here to visit your father a few days before George died.” Sophia stroked the sleek ocelot lying on the sofa beside her, his regal head resting on her lap. She slid her elegant fingers through Perceval’s long, spotted fur, earning a deep throated purr in response. “As if matters were not bleak enough during those terrible last days, that night, after they left here, Edward and his son Stephen were murdered, attacked near their hotel by common footpads.”

Justin clenched his teeth at the reminder of Miss Darracott’s tragedy. Yardley had provided all the details of the deaths of Miss Darracott’s father and brother. One of those details bothered him. Something wasn’t quite right. Still, he had other issues to deal with at the moment. The odd suspicion he had about the murders would have to wait. “I suppose you did not think it was important to tell me I had inherited the guardianship of three females.”

Sophia lifted one finely arched brow. “If you had allowed Mr. Yardley to impart to you the terms of your father’s will, you would have known.”

“Damnation, Sophia. It would...”

Sophia lifted her hand, cutting off his words, her ruby and diamond ring catching the fire of candlelight from the chandeliers hanging from the cove ceiling. “I shall have none of your vulgarity, my boy. Speak civilly, or do not speak at all.”

Justin inclined his head in a silent apology. “Father must have taken leave of his senses. This is beyond everything. Me, bloody Devil Trevelyan, a guardian for three infants.”

“Try to keep a civil tongue. I do wish you would not banter that horrible epitaph around. Really there are times when I think you actually revel in being thought the most dangerous man in London.”

“A poor reputation has its advantages. I cannot remember the last time some matchmaking mama shoved an ambitious chit into my path.”

“No, dear. Now they hide their daughters when you are near.” She gave him her sweetest, most sarcastic smile. “Considering your title, your looks, and your wealth I find it quite an accomplishment on your part.”

Justin ignored her barb. After all, she spoke the truth. He need only examine his behavior with the prim and beguilingly innocent Miss Darracott to confirm the fact he was an unprincipled, disgusting, debauchee. If he were a decent man she would not have found him sleeping on the library floor. If he had a shred of civility he would have stayed at the birthday party Sophia had given in honor of his and Clay’s birthday last night.

The party had been filled with all the appropriate people doing all the appropriate things. In a word: boring. Around midnight he had decided to celebrate in a less genteel fashion, in one of his favorite dens of iniquity—Madame Vachel’s. In deference to their grandmother, Clay had remained at the party, enduring the boring company of three hundred and twenty of London’s most fashionable members of the *ton*. Unlike Justin, Clay could always be depended upon to do the right thing.

As Justin recalled, he had left Vachel’s establishment near dawn, after having his fill of three plump tarts, two bottles of champagne, and a bottle of Irish whiskey. He remembered arriving home and sitting in the library with a decanter of brandy. From there his memory became a bit unreliable.

Apparently he had never made it to bed. It was not the first time he had awakened away from his bedchamber. It would not be the last. Only this time he had been awakened by an innocent female who had come to London to see her guardian. No doubt he had made a lasting impression on Miss Darracott. It should not matter, but for some unfathomable reason it did. Once again he had his father to thank for shining a light on his sterling character.

“Father should have considered my black nature before trying to foster three chits into my care.”

Sophia absently scratched the silvery grey fur beneath Perceval’s chin. “You were your father’s heir, Justin. I am certain he felt the Darracott ladies would be in good hands.”

Justin laughed, the sound bitter in his own ears. “He is still trying to manage me, is he not? Even from the grave. What did he think? Did he truly imagine the guardianship of three innocent females would rehabilitate my black soul? Well, I will be damned before I am saddled with a pack of brats.”

Sophia tilted her head, holding him in a direct gaze. “Pity George did not name Clayton as guardian. Your brother would readily have accepted the responsibility.”

The barb stabbed the intended target. He felt a sharp jab near his heart, in that small unprotected part of him that still craved acceptance. Yet he managed to keep his expression composed. He had learned how to maintain his composure through far worse than a few barbs shot by his grandmother.

“Do not try to twist me around your finger, Sophia. I am well aware Clay is everything I am not.”

“Justin, my dear boy, your father would not have entrusted you with Edward’s daughters if he thought you incapable of handling the task.”

His muscles tensed as they always did when he thought of his father. His father had often told him the only thing Justin was truly good at was overindulgence. “Father did not think me capable of handling anything, except fast horses and equally fast women.”



“Nonsense. Your father thought you were capable of conquering the world, if you had determined it was something you wanted. He admired your dash and daring. He simply wanted to direct it to a higher purpose. I know for certain he was very proud of the way you managed after he cut off your funds. He mentioned it to me more than once during those last days.”

Seven years ago, much to his father’s chagrin, after the Duke had cut off all of Justin’s funds in an attempt to bring his heir under rein, Justin had discovered another talent aside from his ability to get drunk and carouse the town with his friends. With a small loan from Sophia, Justin had managed to accumulate a considerable fortune by playing the Exchange.

At the age of one and twenty Justin had become a wealthy, independent man, with no need for anything from his father. Insult to injury as far as the Duke was concerned. Yet Justin had long ago stopped trying to please his father. It had been a brutal lesson, learned at an early age, but Justin had discovered he could never please the man who had sired him. No matter how hard he tried. In the end he had found it much more enjoyable to live down to his father’s expectations.

“There is no need to paint a pretty picture, Sophia. I am well aware of how Father viewed me.”

“You do not. Not really. Unfortunately, I am afraid you did not always see the best of your father.” Sophia lowered her eyes, staring at the cat, stroking his silky fur a long moment before she spoke. “My son was not always a harsh man, Justin. If you tried, you could remember a time when he was warm, affectionate—everything he shunned after your mother’s passing.”

Justin curled his hand against the smooth mantel. He stared into the coals burning on the polished andirons, fighting the tremors that had commenced deep inside of him, in a place where a small, wounded boy still dwelled. That boy had known affection—a mother who had preferred life in the country with her family to the glitter of London, a father who had adored his wife and two sons. But it had all changed when Justin was nine, on a terrible day in December when his mother had died. All the warmth in his young life had died that day. The home where he had always felt safe and protected had altered, devolved into a place of fear and shame.

“Near the end George spoke of a great many things he regretted in his life.” Sophia’s voice, soft with emotion brushed against Justin’s back. “Including his relationship with you and Clayton. He realized he had made dreadful errors in judgment when you were boys, mistakes that cost all of you dearly.”

Justin drew the bitter scent of burning coal into his lungs. Inside memories threatened the carefully constructed cage where he had forced them into years ago. “I am certain father went to his maker with a clear conscience. I doubt he regretted anything.”

Sophia was quiet a long while. “You are mistaken, Justin. Your father truly regretted what happened to you at the hands of that vile man. He spoke of it many times near the end. It is time to forgive your father, Justin.”

Justin squeezed his fist against the mantel until his knuckles blanched white, while inside he clamped down hard on the lid of the coffin containing vicious childhood memories. He still had a few visible scars on his back and legs. Yet the scars that didn’t show were far more brutal.

No one living truly knew what had happened to him those months after his father had deserted his sons. No one except Clay and Sophia knew the entire truth, the extent of the brutality he had suffered. He intended to keep it that way.

“The only thing Father regretted was the fact he failed to mold me into his own image.”

“If you could only understand how he felt after your mother died.”

“Felt?” Images from the night his mother had died rose in his memory. Justin had gone to his father, needing him as only a child can need a father’s love. His entire world was crumbling around him. He had needed reassurance, a hand on his shoulder. Instead, he had received a cold reprimand for his boyish tears. *Affection is for the weak, remember that. The nobility do not show their sorrow. Emotions must be controlled, or we will be lost.* His father would repeat that lecture over and over again in the passing years, pounding the words into both of his sons, as though he could erase all of the emotion in them.

“In case you did not notice, George William did not condone emotion of any kind.”

“It was not lack of sensibilities that made him behave the way he did. It was because he felt too much. He adored your mother. He adored you and Clayton. I know he was afraid he could not continue without her. For him, it was necessary to shut off all of his emotions. Otherwise, I do not know if he would have survived.”

He thought of the icy stranger who had sired him. No matter how hard he tried to forget, the past remained. The cruelty his father had sanctioned stayed with him, lurking in his deepest memories buried in an all too shallow grave.

“If that were true, then he was certainly a master of disguise.”

Sophia was quiet for several moments. When she finally spoke, the tremor of sorrow that had colored her words was once again washed from her voice. “It was guilt that altered him, Justin. He did not know how to deal with it after your mother died. I feared he actually might end his life.”

Justin thought of what Clayton had confided in him long ago. Soon after their mother had died, Clay had found

their father in the study with a loaded pistol in his hand. If not for Clay interfering that night, their father would have killed himself. His sons had not mattered to him. Nothing had mattered, except his own loss. It was another reason not to become entangled in an affair of the heart. A man could lose himself completely to a woman.

“It was easier to hide from his feelings than to face them. It was easier to keep you and Clayton at a distance. If you had only seen your father those last few days, I am certain you would have forgiven him.”

“Forgiven him?” Justin glanced over his shoulder at his grandmother. “I find it difficult to believe Father actually sought my forgiveness on his deathbed.”

Sophia shrugged her slender shoulders. “Perhaps not in words. Still, I know how much he regretted the past. I know he wished he could go back in time and alter his decisions.”

Justin eased open his clenched fist. “It is best to leave the past behind us. It cannot be altered or reclaimed. We all must live with the decisions we make.”

Small sounds filled up the quiet that stretched between them—the rattle of rain against the windowpanes, the rustle of spent coals tumbling through the andirons, the deep-throated purr of a contented ocelot. Justin could sense Sophia’s gaze upon his back, the insistent stare she always gave him when she demanded his attention. Yet he refused to turn to face her, not when she had managed to push his composure to the brink.

Sophia released her breath in a long sigh. “What did the Darracott child want from you this morning?”

An image of Miss Darracott’s face burned through the ugliness of his memories. Something dangerously close to guilt pricked him in the vicinity of his belly at the thought of her. Since he had long ago decided guilt was a useless emotion, he quickly dismissed the sensation.

“Miss Darracott is hardly a child. I would judge she is near one and twenty.”

“Did you ever discover what she wanted before you chased her back to Bramsleigh?”

Justin glanced over his shoulder, frowning at his grandmother. “I did not precisely chase her back to Bramsleigh.”

“I can only imagine the impression you made, refusing to believe her. You must have shocked the poor child dreadfully. As far as I know she has never even been in London before today. Her father seldom came to town, unless he was attending an auction or a lecture. I do not believe Edward ever brought any of the girls. After his wife died, he was quite oblivious to society. It is a pity Yardley did not give her my address instead of yours.”

After seeing the innocent Miss Darracott, Justin could well understand why a father would keep her in the country, safe from the dangerous influence of rakes such as her current guardian. “Kept his daughters wrapped in cotton wool, did he?”

“I doubt dear Edward even thought of bringing the girls into society. He was primarily a scholar, fascinated by anything medieval. Although when he was here, I recall he did mention he was looking for a house in town. His eldest daughter was insisting he give her sister a Season. I think Miss Darracott had convinced him it was time to leave the seclusion of Bramsleigh.”

“Miss Darracott no doubt had grown bored with the country and decided to badger her father until he did what she wanted. No doubt she was the one who wanted all the nonsense of the Season. She probably came here to badger me into giving it to her.”

“Not all members of my sex are manipulative little schemers, Justin.”

Justin laughed. “Every female tries her best to manage any man within her orbit.”

Sophia lifted her brows. “Pity you have not met a female who could manage you. Your life would be a great deal more settled.”

Justin bowed to her. “I like my life just the way it is.”

Sophia stroked her hand over Perceval’s head. “Edward was such a handsome man. Tall and dark, with startling blue eyes. His son certainly favored him. As I recall, his wife Judith was quite a handsome woman, tall and fair. Did you find Miss Darracott a handsome girl?”

“Miss Darracott is handsome, though nothing out of the ordinary. Certainly not a diamond of the first water. I doubt I would have noticed her in a crowded room.” Still he could not deny the chit had managed to heat his blood. Even now, the thought of Miss Darracott warm and supple in his arms turned his blood to liquid fire. If that was not enough of a shock, he had discovered that no matter how much he tried to banish her, he could not get the image of her face out of his mind.

“One of her female relatives really should have sponsored the girl.” Sophia stared toward the windows. “I have always thought it would be amusing to bring a girl into society.”

Justin shrugged. “I suppose you could amuse yourself with the Darracott chits.”

“I suppose I could.” Sophia tilted her head and smiled at Justin. “I really wish you had met Edward. He was a very likable man. And his son, so charming, so full of promise.”

Justin had seen little of his father since the day he and Clay had been sent to Harrow. Certainly their strained relationship had not presented many opportunities for Justin to meet his father’s cronies. “I will have to be satisfied with meeting his daughters.”

Sophia smiled, her eyes filling with a glint of amusement. “So you plan to visit your wards.”

Justin frowned as he acknowledged the reasons he wanted to visit Bramsleigh. In spite of his better instincts, he wanted to see Miss Darracott again, if only to assure himself this ridiculous infatuation with the woman was nothing more than a momentary aberration. Virginal chits were hardly to his taste. He made a practice of avoiding untouched maidens the way he would avoid the pox.

Long ago he had learned that money and position could stake a man out like a lamb. Behind every innocent face lurked a predator on the hunt, eager to drag her prey to the altar. Not this man. Marriage did not reside in his future. He would never tame his wild ways for any female. And even though he knew he was well beyond redemption, he still maintained a few precious principles, honesty among them.

He could not live a lie. He had no intention of setting up a nursery for the sake of continuing the noble name of Trevelyan. London Society provided too many examples of marriages of convenience: men who sought comfort from their mistresses while their wives took lovers to console them. He refused to participate in that hypocrisy.

“I assure you, Sophia, I have no intention of playing nursemaid to a pack of infants. I plan to dispatch any obligation I might have to the Darracott ladies as quickly as possible.”



## Chapter Three

Sunlight played against her eyelids, coaxing Isabel from slumber. She nestled deeper into her pillow, breathing in the scent of clean linen that had been stored with sprigs of lavender, resisting the bright intrusion into her dreams. Still, once broken, the delicate thread of sleep could not be mended. She opened her eyes and stared straight into the face of her fourteen year-year old sister, Phoebe.

“Finally.” Phoebe turned and yelled toward the open door. “She is awake, Eloise.”

Isabel flinched at the shriek. “Phoebe, dear, do be careful. You will shatter the window glass. Not to mention my head.”

Phoebe hopped onto the bed, her golden curls bouncing against her back. She sat beside Isabel, dangling her feet over the edge of the bed. “I was beginning to think you were going to sleep through the day.”

Isabel sat up against the pillows and glanced at the recently opened blue cotton curtains. “And so you came to rescue me from that terrible fate.”

“I wanted to stay up last night to see you when you came home, but I fell asleep. I simply could not wait another instant to hear all about London and the Duke.” Phoebe’s dark blue eyes glowed with excitement. “What was he like? Very elegant? Was he cold and distant, or did he make you feel welcome?”

Isabel hugged the patchwork quilt of colorful chintz against her chest. The Duke of Marlow had invaded her dreams last night, holding her, laughing at her every protest, until she crumbled beneath his sensual advances. Heat shimmered inside her at the memory of his hands on her body, his lips moving against her mouth, his splendid body pressing warmly against her.

She had never realized one could harbor such a powerful infatuation for a man who did not possess a single shred of decency. It was shocking to discover how shaky her own scruples might be.

Until he had held her, she had never realized how conventional her life seemed, how staid, how dreadfully dull. She could not deny how much she longed to feel that heady exhilaration again. She had never felt more vital than those few moments in his arms. “The Duke of Marlow is not exactly what we expected.”

“Phoebe, I told you not to bother Belle.” Eloise paused beside the bed, her hands clasped at her slim waist, and her green eyes filled with disapproval. Dark brown curls framed an expression far too mature for her seventeen years. “She needs her rest.”

Phoebe crinkled her upturned nose. “It is nearly half past eight. I am certain Belle does not want to sleep away the entire day. Do you Belle?”

“Certainly not.” Isabel smiled warmly at Eloise. “I would not want to be thought a lazy dolt.”

“Well then, if you truly do not mind.” Eloise grinned as she drew a wooden armchair near the bed, the wooden legs scraping against the bare oak planks of the floor. She sat on the edge of the chair, like an excited child waiting for a present. “Please tell us all about your trip.”

Isabel looked from one expectant face to the other, wishing she had better news for her sisters. Slowly, she related the events of her trip to London, omitting the more salacious details of her meeting with the infuriating Duke of Marlow. Still, she could not banish the memories, or dismiss the sparkling excitement that tingled through her at the mere mention of his name. It was as if that excitement were a being with a mind and spirit all its own, a mercurial creature that had somehow taken residence where it did not belong. Once in residence it had decided to plague her, poke and prod and pinch her when she least expected it.

“According to Mr. Yardley, the circumstances do not alter the situation. The present Duke of Marlow will control our lives for as long as he sees fit,” Isabel said, concluding her story.

“He is a terrible man.” Phoebe looked as though she had just gotten a whiff of an angry skunk. “I wager he is as ugly as a toad.”

Isabel thought of the young man she had met yesterday. “Only on the inside. He is in fact remarkably handsome.”

Phoebe huffed. “If one does not have honor, it does not matter how one looks. And the Duke obviously is not an honorable man.”

Isabel was not ready to pass judgment. “I do not believe we should attach such an insult to him. At least not until we truly know all the incidentals. We do not know much about him. Still, I do suspect he is a difficult man. I am not altogether certain he will view his responsibilities in the appropriate light.”

“You must not worry, Belle.” Eloise squeezed her elder sister’s hand. “We will do fine without any help from the Duke.”

Isabel saw the disappointment in her sister’s green eyes. Even though Eloise seldom spoke of her hopes and dreams since their father and brother had died, Isabel knew her sister still dreamed of a chance to enter society, a chance to meet someone beyond the bounds of their small country village. Eloise was an uncommonly handsome young lady. Isabel knew she would be a success, if only they could find a means to provide her a Season. In a few years they would have Phoebe to think of as well.

“Eloise is right.” Phoebe lifted her chin. “Once we find the old baron’s treasure, we shall not need help from anyone. Especially not the terrible Duke of Marlow.”

Isabel and her sisters had grown up believing the legend of the Baron of Bramsleigh's treasure was nothing more than a fairy tale, until the baron's journal had recently been discovered. Unfortunately the book had been stolen the night their father was murdered. "I am afraid we have little hope of finding the old baron's treasure without the journal."

"We will find the treasure." Phoebe clenched her hands into fists on her lap. "All we need do is search for it."

Isabel shook her head. "If the treasure truly exists, it could be anywhere. The baron may not even have hidden it at Bramsleigh."

"The treasure exists. Papa said it did." Phoebe's lips drew into a tight line, her expression growing mulish. "And Cousin Gerard thinks it exists as well. He has been searching for it since he moved into Bramsleigh. Dottie told me she has seen him searching the house, tapping on wall panels as though he were looking for a hidden recess. If he finds it before we do, he will keep all of it. And it belongs to us. Everything in the house belongs to us. He gets to keep our house, but everything in it belongs to us."

Isabel had no doubt the housemaid was correct about Gerard's interest in the treasure. Still, she could not pin her sisters' futures on a legend. "I doubt we will ever find the treasure without the journal. Think of how many people have searched for it over the years and no one has found it."

"I have been thinking." Phoebe stared toward the window, her expression growing thoughtful. In the distance, across a wide expanse of rolling green park, the stately walls of Bramsleigh Hall rose from the brow of a hill overlooking the sea. "I am certain the old baron must have hidden the treasure in the caves. It would be a wonderful place to hide jewels."

Isabel shook her head. "Even if he did hide them in the caves, we have no idea where to start looking. Those caves meander for miles beneath the cliffs."

Phoebe turned to her sister, her expression set with determination. "We have to search for it. If we can find the jewels then we can live in a nice house again. And Eloise and you can go to London and attend parties and balls as you ought. Do you not see? We must search for the treasure."

"Not in the caves." Although Isabel hated to extinguish the glow in her young sister's eyes, she had long ago assumed the role of parent as well as sister. "It would not be prudent."

"If we took lamps and went in pairs, I am certain it would be safe."

"We will not search the caves," Isabel said. "It would be far too dangerous."

"But Belle, if the terrible Duke will not help us, we will never leave this horrible place."

"We shall manage, Phoebe." Isabel touched her sister's smooth cheek. "I will find a way to get what we need. Right after breakfast, I will write another letter to the Duke."

"He does not want to help us. You could write a thousand letters and he still would not help us." Phoebe slid off the bed and stood glaring at Isabel. "I only want to help, that is all. I am not as much a child as you think."

Isabel hugged her knees to her chest as Phoebe ran from the room, her booted heels pounding the bare floor. The weight of her responsibilities pressed against her chest until her lungs ached. There were moments when she dearly wished for someone with whom she could share the responsibilities of raising her sisters. Moments when she wished someone would touch her hand and make her believe everything would be all right. She had hoped that someone might be their guardian.

"We will be fine, Belle," Eloise said, as though she could read her sister's thoughts. "I know you want to give both Phoebe and me a Season, but I do not need to go to London. And by the time Phoebe is old enough, perhaps we will have saved enough for her to have one."

"It takes a great deal of money to finance a Season, dearest. We could never save that amount. It is all we can do to keep food on the table."

Eloise lifted her chin and forced her lips into a smile. "Then we will all stay here. We will have each other."

Isabel squeezed her sister's slim hand. "What future do you and Phoebe have if you are hidden away in this little cottage?"

Eloise glanced down at their clasped hands. "You never had a Season, Belle."

Isabel closed her eyes. Once she had dreamed of attending balls and parties. In moments of weakness she still imagined meeting her very own gentleman. He would be a scholarly man, much like her father. He would be kind and gentle and love her as much as she loved him. Yet, she had put those dreams away in a special place, locked deep inside of her. Her chance for a life beyond the walls of this cottage did not matter, not when she thought of her sisters.

"I never had a Season and now I am a spinster, with little chance of ever altering that state. For I cannot imagine marrying any man I did not truly love. At my age, I have little chance of ever making a love match. I do not wish the same fate for you."

"I will not believe that is true." Eloise squeezed Isabel's hand. "One of these days the right man will come along and discover how wonderful you are."

*The right man.* Unbidden the image of a sardonic face rose in her mind. What would Eloise say if she confided the way she had reacted to the very improper advances of the Duke of Marlow? He was certainly not the man for

her.

Marlow was like a great untamed beast, powerful and sensual. He was definitely far too wild for a sensible female such as herself, a practical woman, a woman who had never set foot in a London ballroom. She was a bluestocking, a country miss who lacked the polish and sophistication of the women of London. If they had met in a ballroom Marlow would never have favored her with more than a formal bow. She could imagine how effectively he would have dismissed her with one lift of a black brow. No, Marlow was certainly not the right man for her.

“Your gentleman shall be handsome and rich. And he must be brilliant, or he would bore you. And he will have a kind heart and a noble spirit.”

“And shall he be atop a great white charger?”

Eloise smiled, her green eyes warming with the fantasy. “I do not think silvery armor is quite the fashion, but if he had lived in the days of tournaments he would have been the bravest knight in the realm. Nothing but the most valiant knight would do for you. Honest and loyal, brave and constant.”

Isabel suspected Eloise’s ideal man would also be a terrible bore. No one could say that of the Duke of Marlow. He was neither an ideal nor a bore. He was in fact the most infuriating, maddening, completely fascinating man she had ever met. If she were honest, she wished to heaven she might see him again. Although she suspected, even if she did manage to convince Marlow to provide for his wards, he would do so from a distance. No doubt Yardley would be the one to handle their affairs.

“I am afraid we will all grow grey waiting for this paragon. It is far better if we find a way to remedy our situation without benefit of a hero. I do believe charming knights are in short supply. A wise female learns to take care of herself. Pity the laws of this country do not recognize the fact women have fully functioning brains, that we are capable of inheriting and running an estate.”

Eloise hugged her arms to her waist. “You would have managed Bramsleigh better than any man.”

Isabel shook off the despair that came with the realization of their circumstances. “I am certain, if I apply to the Duke in a manner he can readily accept, we will get what we want. It is simply a matter of figuring out a way to make it seem a bargain to him.”

The fresh scent of baking bread drifted up from the kitchen. Her stomach grumbled, reminding Isabel she had not eaten anything except a slice of bread and a cup of coffee the day before. Although the mail coach had stopped for meals, the waiters at the inns never delivered the food in time for the patrons to eat. At each inn, they had slapped her food in front of her just as the coachman had called “All ready.” Since food was not allowed in the coach, she had gone without. After the third time it had happened, Isabel had suspected the delay in delivery of her food was by design.

“I am famished.”

“Cousin Gerard sent over a tin of chocolate yesterday.” Eloise crinkled her nose. “I do believe he is trying to coax you into accepting him.”

Isabel thought of her handsome cousin, the man who now resided in her childhood home. He had made his intentions known on several occasions. It would be a good match. He was a sensible young man. They could all return to the Hall. She could provide for her sisters. The only problem she could see was the inconvenient fact she had no affection for him, at least not in that manner. The thought of becoming his wife and allowing him the liberties that would entail filled her with a horrible sense of dread. If she could help it, she did not plan to sell herself to anyone.

“I must find a way to make the Duke honor his obligations to us.”

“Do you think you will be able to convince the Duke to help us?” Eloise asked.

“I certainly doubt the Duke wants to be saddled with our guardianship any more than we want him to have control of our lives.” Isabel tossed aside the covers and rolled from bed. She shivered in the cold room; coal was at a premium these days. “I intend to present him with a suitable alternative to the situation.”

Eloise frowned, her expression betraying her doubts. “He did not sound like a man who is easily persuaded.”

“I doubt he is.” Isabel slipped into her blue wool wrapper. “Still, I suspect he will be anxious to dispatch any obligation he has to us. I shall present him with a simple way to be rid of us. I simply need to think through the possibilities. Right now I better get ready for the day.”

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After breakfast, Isabel sat at the writing desk in the small sitting room, staring at a blank sheet of paper. Somehow it had been much easier to write to the Duke before she had met him. What the devil could she say to him? How could she convince him to do what needed to be done?

Isabel’s throat tightened when she thought of all the things she wished she could give her sisters. They had little chance for marriage if they remained here, a scant chance for families of their own. How could she make a man such as Marlow understand how truly desperate they were?

She closed her eyes against the sting of tears. She never thought the day would come when she would worry about the price of beef, when a cup of hot chocolate in the morning was a rare luxury provided by the man who had taken her home, when her life would be controlled by one infuriating man. Not for the first time she cursed the laws that allowed a distant relative the luxury of taking everything a woman possessed. If she had been born a man she would

not find herself in this position.

Silently she shook off the blue devils. She did not usually indulge in mournful, sentimental musing. It accomplished nothing. Tears would not bring back her father and brother. Tears would not earn a decent life for her sisters. One must look to the future, not the past. And one must take care of the present, which meant she must deal with the maddening Duke of Marlow. She had a letter that must be written.

A brisk knock on the door caught her attention. Mrs. Tweedbury would be in the kitchen, which was at the back of the house. The housekeeper no doubt could not hear the visitor's summons. Eloise had gone to look for Phoebe.

The knock sounded again; crisp and demanding. She suspected Gerard had come to call. She only hoped he would not broach the matter of his marriage proposal again. She hurried from the room, down a narrow hall and opened the front door.

Justin Trevelyan, His Grace the Duke of Marlow, stood on the threshold of the cottage, his eyes narrowed, a frown drawing lines upon his face. He looked at her as though he wished very much to be anywhere but here.

Excitement speared through her, crackling like jagged lightning across a dark sky. Her heart sprinted into a headlong race that stole the breath from her lungs, robbing her of any chance of forming a single syllable. Tall and commanding, the man was far more devastating than she remembered. His face bore no trace of stubble, revealing each nuance of his perfectly sculpted countenance. She hadn't noticed the slight cleft in his chin yesterday. She had noticed his eyes, those incredible eyes that were neither green nor grey, but an intriguing blending of the two colors. Stunning eyes. Eyes that could pin her where she stood, like a butterfly to a board.

He wore no hat. The wind had tossed his thick black waves into wild disarray around his face. It suited him. Nothing was tame about this man. The exquisitely tailored coat hugged his broad shoulders with dark blue wool. The stark white linen of his cravat heightened the sun darkened skin of his face. The pale blue silk of his waistcoat hugged his broad chest and narrow waist. Buff colored breeches clung to his long legs before sliding into shiny black boots. She was hardly an expert on gentleman's fashion, but she could tell there was nothing of excess in his taste. Nothing that might distract from the portrait of potent masculinity he presented. A few moments in his presence yesterday, had not prepared her for the full impact of seeing him again. She could do nothing but stare.





## Chapter Four

The swift heat infusing his blood caught Justin off guard. He clenched his fists at his sides, annoyed at the insidious attraction this woman held for him. On the way here he had tried to convince himself his memory of Miss Darracott was distorted by the aftermath of too much liquor. His brain had not been functioning properly. She had taken him unaware when he had awakened to find her so near. It was the novelty of awakening to the face of innocence that had struck him so severely. Yet standing here, looking at her in the morning sunlight, his every attempt to deny her appeal mocked him. Still, he was not about to allow a woman get the better of him. He did as was his habit and took refuge behind sarcasm.

“Do close your mouth, Miss Darracott. You look like a trout leaping for a fly.”

She snapped her mouth closed. A look of acute discomfort flickered across her delicate features before she regained control of her composure.

The doorway framed her. The pale morning light painted a portrait of a young woman standing in a plain blue gown, her golden brown hair pinned into neat coils. There was nothing exceptional in the portrait. Her face would not inspire sonnets. True, it was a well formed face—oval in nature, her nose was slim and straight with a slight upward tilt, her lips full and a dusky pink.

Perhaps it was a handsome face, but nothing out of the ordinary. She did have lovely skin, as pale as the finest cream with a hint of rose below the high cheekbones. As he recalled that skin was as smooth and soft as satin.

“Good morning, Duke.”

He inclined his head in a small bow. “Good morning, Miss Darracott.”

Perhaps her eyes were a bit extraordinary. Set beneath arched brows, they were large and of a blue that was neither dark nor light, but a glorious shade that rivaled the sky on a clear summer day. The lashes of those eyes were thick and dark and long. Yes, perhaps there was something out of the way about those fine eyes. He recalled they had regarded him with wide eyed wonder yesterday. At the moment they were wide and filled with something close to astonishment.

“Is it customary at Bramsleigh to leave your callers standing about on the doorstep, Miss Darracott?”

“I beg your pardon.” She moistened her lips. “Do come in.”

He followed her into the house, along a narrow hallway and into a small sitting room. The thick carpet, elegant sofa and deep armchairs were in stark contrast to the unpleasant little room. Obviously the furnishings had once graced the hall. A short while ago he had arrived at Bramsleigh Hall only to discover the Darracott ladies had been dispossessed of their family home, victims of primogeniture. The Duke of Marlow’s wards were currently residing in a dwelling that wasn’t fit for his horses.

He had walked from the hall to this small cottage, needing to ease muscles cramped from the long ride. Yet the exercise had not eased the restless feeling plaguing him.

The little sleep Justin had found in his coach on the journey to Bramsleigh had proved restless. Last night Miss Darracott had had the audacity to invade his dreams. She had come to him, soft and willing, drawing him into her warm embrace. In that treacherous realm he had known a satisfaction that had eluded him when the sun dawned. He had awakened aching and frustrated from a ridiculous infatuation with an untouched maiden, of all things.

*Confounded female.*

Miss Darracott crossed the room and turned at the windows, as though she needed to put every inch of the space provided between them. “You startled me, Duke. I had no idea you intended to visit.”

“Then we are even on that score. You certainly startled me yesterday.”

She did something unexpected then: she smiled, warm and generous, completely without artifice or guile. The impact of that smile hit Justin like a clenched fist to the belly. That smile somehow managed to transform her face into something rare and so beautiful he forgot to breathe.

“I will have to remember never to disturb a sleeping lion in his lair.”

For some diabolical reason, he could not get the thought of taking this woman into his arms out of his mind. Still, he could not ignore the fact the intriguing creature standing before him was a lady, innocent as the day she was born. Worse, the infuriating female was under his protection, which placed her completely beyond his reach. The appalling circumstances did nothing for his temper.

“What the devil were you doing in my house without a chaperon yesterday?”

The smile vanished at his harsh tone as quickly as if he had slapped her. “I am well past the age of needing a chaperon.”

“You are a child, Miss Darracott. A green girl who has no idea of the consequences of running all over London without benefit of a chaperon.”

Sparks flashed in her blue eyes. Still, her voice remained low and controlled as she spoke. “I am four and twenty, Duke. And I have been managing my father’s household since I was fourteen.”

“Bramsleigh is not London. A woman’s reputation is as delicate as a fine crystal vase; once broken it cannot be

repaired.” The irony of the situation was not lost on Justin. Here he was, bloody Devil Trevelyan, lecturing about propriety. Under other circumstances he might have found the ludicrous state of affairs amusing. As it was he wanted to stomp his feet and howl his frustration.

Miss Darracott stiffened, her expression revealing her anger, though her voice betrayed only a hint of her outrage. “I have never done anything to injure my reputation.”

“No young woman of quality would ever call upon an unmarried gentleman.”

“At the time I believed I was calling upon my guardian.”

“Even so, you should have brought your maid, at the very least.”

“I no longer have a maid. And I could not see the point of forcing our housekeeper to make such a trip. Mrs. Tweedbury is a bit flighty, and not at all fond of long trips. And if she had accompanied me, it would have left my sisters here with only our manservant. I am certain you can understand why I could not do so.”

He stared at her, a dreadful suspicion stirring within him. “Who accompanied you to London?”

She folded her hands at her waist, her chin lifting a fraction as she spoke. “There was no need for anyone to accompany me.”

He moved toward her, closing the distance between them in long, predatory strides. Her eyes grew wide as he drew near. For a moment she looked as though she might take flight. Instead she chose to stand her ground. A muscle flickered in her smooth cheek as she set her jaw. She lifted her chin and met his angry glare with cool defiance. Not many had ever managed to face him down in this manner. It only managed to fuel his frustration with the woman.

“Do you mean to tell me you traveled to London alone?” he asked, keeping his voice low and menacing.

“I saw no reason to subject one of my sisters to the discomforts of a mail coach. Even if we could have afforded a ticket.”

“You traveled by the mail? Alone?”

She swept open her arm. “As you can see, we no longer maintain a coach, or horses for that matter. The mail was a great deal more acceptable than walking.”

“You should have stayed at home, where you belonged. You certainly should not have set foot in a mail coach.”

“I needed to address certain matters with my guardian. When Mr. Yardley informed me the Duke of Marlow had returned to London, I decided it was time we met to discuss the small matter of my sisters’ welfare.”

That small matter weighed as much as Gibraltar and he felt every stone of it. Guilt was not an emotion that settled easily on his shoulders. Yet as much as he tried to shake it off, Justin could not deny the weight of it pressing against him. “Miss Darracott, you should have written to me rather than go flying off to London like a wet goose.”

“Since my father’s death, I have sent five letters addressed to you. I have received no response. I have also corresponded several times with your attorney, Mr. Yardley. He informed me you were out of the country and nothing could be done about my concerns until you returned. He assured me he would speak with you concerning our guardianship upon your return to London. His last correspondence indicated you had returned, but were far too busy to address the small matter of your wards. Still, he assured me you would soon give us proper consideration.”

Justin thought of the pile of correspondence sitting on the desk in his study. Perhaps he should have looked at more than those referring solely to business concerns. “Instead of waiting for my response you decided to take matters into your own hands and barge into my house.”

“My father has been gone for nine months. My last correspondence with Yardley assuring me you would do something was three weeks ago. I thought it was time I met my guardian.”

He cringed inwardly at the condemnation in her beautiful eyes. “You can stow the recriminations, Miss Darracott. I did not know about you or your sisters until yesterday.”

She lifted one arched brow. “Do you mean to tell me Mr. Yardley never informed you about us?”

“I believe he tried on several occasions.”

“But it must have been in the will.”

“Suffice it to say I was not interested in the terms of my father’s will until a certain young woman barged into my house and bothered me.”

“You did not wish to know the contents of your father’s will?”

“No.”

She considered this a moment, as though she were trying to decide the truth in his words. “I suppose I can understand why Mr. Yardley would be reluctant to press the matter with you.”

“Most people are reluctant to press any matter with me, Miss Darracott.”

She studied him a moment, as though searching for the pieces of a puzzle she had only just stumbled upon. It was obvious she thought his relationship with his sire must have been something out of the ordinary. He held her inquisitive look, feeling as though she were trying to pry away every defense he had erected against the world. She could not, he assured himself. He had long ago learned to fashion his face into an impenetrable mask. Few people existed who could read him.

She released her breath in a soft sigh that brushed his chin with the scent of chocolate. Chocolate for breakfast he would wager. Would her mouth taste as intriguing?

“Under the circumstances, I can understand how my appearance in your library yesterday might have caught you at a disadvantage.”

A lock of hair had fallen free of the pins securing the thick coil at the nape of her neck. The lustrous curl spilled over her shoulder, brushing the blue wool that hugged the curve of her breast. She was certainly not as generously endowed as the women he usually chose to share his bed. Her figure was negligible by comparison. He usually preferred women a good deal plumper. Yet the memory of the weight of her nestled in his palm flickered in his brain, kindling warmth that swept across his skin. Still, he could not ignore the appalling fact the intriguing creature standing before him was a lady, innocent as the day she was born. Worse, the infuriating female was under his protection, which placed her completely beyond his reach.

“It would seem my father’s demise was a greater disaster than I imagined.”

“I can well see why you would find it so. On top of the loss of your father, you find you are saddled with our guardianship.” She stared up at him, and he had the uneasy feeling she was assessing him with those candid eyes, evaluating the best tactics for attack. “Obviously the situation must be altered. You cannot possibly act as our guardian. I cannot imagine how you were ever placed in this situation in the first place. I can only imagine your father was not thinking clearly because of his illness.”

Although Justin regarded the role of guardian to the Darracott females in the same light as pestilence and plague, he bristled at her quick dismissal of his abilities to perform the obligation. “I take it you think me incapable of handling the position.”

“You are a bachelor.”

“That does not preclude me from being a guardian.”

She moved away from him, putting five feet of morning sunlight between them before turning to face him. “You cannot mean to say you actually wish to continue in this role?”

The last thing in the world he wanted was to be this woman’s guardian. Yet a perverse streak of obstinacy welled deep inside of him, forcing him to argue with her. “At the moment I see no alternative.”

“Then allow me to give you one. Turn the guardianship of my sisters over to me.”

The impertinent little chit actually thought she could do a better job than he could. “You expect me to place an infant in charge of the nursery?”

She parted her lips, her expression that of a woman who had just been deeply insulted. “I have been looking after my sisters since I was fourteen.”

“As I understand, your father was alive and well until last year. No doubt he oversaw all of your decisions.”

She planted her hands on her hips. “Papa trusted me.”

He rolled his eyes toward heaven. “I doubt he would have approved of an unchaperoned lady taking a mail coach to London on a whim.”

“I never would have taken that journey if my guardian had taken any interest in his wards.”

“Damnation woman, I did not even know you existed until yesterday.”

“Precisely. You are not even responsible enough to read your father’s will. And yet you expect me to believe you are to be trusted with the guardianship of my sisters.”

He stalked her, his hands twitching with the anger boiling inside of him. “It really does not matter what you think, Miss Darracott. I am your sisters’ guardian. And as much as it might be distasteful to both of us, I am also responsible for you.”

“I am not a child.”

“No. You certainly are not.” He was much too aware of the slender curves hidden beneath that simple blue gown ever to mistake this woman for a child. He leaned forward until his nose nearly touched the tip of hers. He was accustomed to intimidating people. His title alone was enough to send the weak at heart scurrying for safety. The demeanor he had cultivated over the years ensured no one challenge him, except perhaps Sophia and Clay. He expected this country chit to cower. Instead, Miss Darracott stood her ground, meeting his tactics with a firm resolve.

“From this day forward I expect you to behave with the proper decorum of a lady of quality.”

Her startled gasp brushed his lips with a damp heat flavored by that intriguing scent of chocolate he had caught earlier. “I have never behaved with anything less.”

“That has been proven otherwise.” He smiled in the face of her fury. “Do you think you can manage to behave properly? Or, should I hire a governess to tutor you in proper social etiquette?”

“Why you...”

“Careful, Miss Darracott. A proper lady never loses her temper.”

She closed her eyes and sucked in a deep breath. He could see her trembling with the effort to control her rage.

“A proper gentleman would not provoke a lady into such reprehensible behavior.”

He tilted his head and smiled. “I do as I please, Miss Darracott.”

“I cannot imagine why you would want to be our guardian.”

He couldn't quite understand it either, this odd sense of responsibility creeping out of the shadows deep inside of him. Someone had to look after the foolish chit. And he had no intention of relinquishing control to her, or anyone.

“From time to time I find it necessary to take a hand where I am needed.”

She issued a strangled groan. “You are doing this out of spite.”

“Nonsense. I am doing this because it is my duty.”

“It is...” She hesitated at the shrill shout ringing from the hall.

“Belle!”

Justin dragged his gaze from Miss Darracott and directed his attention to the source of that shrill sound. He glanced toward the arched entrance of the room just as a young woman dashed across the threshold. She halted when she saw him, her eyes wide, her lips parted. He need only see the resemblance to Miss Darracott to realize this handsome young woman was one of his wards, undoubtedly the middle sister.

“What is it?” Miss Darracott hurried across the room to meet her sister. “What is wrong?”

Miss Eloise Darracott dragged her gaze from Justin to look at her sister. “I cannot find Phoebe. I have looked everywhere.”