

DEBRA DIER

*Scoundrel*



# Chapter One

*England, 1812*

DECEPTION DID NOT suit her. In the past, Emily Maitland had always prided herself on her honesty. In the past, she had never told a lie of any proportion. Yet, the lie she had created three weeks ago in London was more than just your average size prevarication. No, her first foray into the fabrication of fact was about the size of Gibraltar. And she could feel that lie pressing against her chest, like a solid chunk of frozen granite.

Emily stood in a corner of the ballroom in her parents' home near Bristol, staring at the swarm of guests gathered beneath the glitter of crystal chandeliers to celebrate her recent marriage. If she was not certain one of her family or friends would question her absence, she would escape the crowd, retreat to her room, and hide like a coward.

"I know how you must feel, celebrating tonight while you wonder if he is safe. Believe me I know." Marisa Grantham squeezed her hand. "We must have faith he will return to you soon."

Emily looked into the concerned blue eyes of one of her closest friends and fought the words clawing at her throat. What would she think if Marisa knew the truth? Would she ever forgive her for deceiving her in this way? "Mari, you and Meg are my dearest friends in the world. You know that."

Marisa smiled, a look of curiosity flitting across her beautiful face. "Of course I know, silly."

"You know I would never wish to hide anything from you." Emily drew a deep breath, catching the mingled scents of various sweet waters hovering in the warm room. "And you also know I would never in my life put you or Meg in a position that would threaten your integrity."

Marisa tilted her head, a raven curl brushing her shoulder. She regarded Emily in that singular way she had that came when sharp intelligence melded with an inquisitive nature. "Emily, you know you can tell me anything."

Emily wondered if she might share this burden. She glanced to the dance floor where Margaret Drummond was gliding through the steps of a country dance. In the past few years Marisa, Meg, and Emily had shared each London Season. They had also shared their dreams, their joys, and their secrets. The friendship they had forged had helped each of them survive Town life. There was one secret she had not shared with them.

Emily stiffened when she noticed her grandmother step from a crowd of people near one of the refreshment tables. Dear heaven, she was headed in Emily's direction. One look at Lady Harriet Whitcomb's face, and Emily knew her grandmother was not pleased with her performance this night. She marched through the crowd with all the purpose of an arrow headed for her target. Emily drew in her breath and prepared for the worst as Lady Harriet drew near.

"Is something wrong?" Marisa asked.

"No. Nothing is wrong. You were right, Mari. I'm simply concerned about him." It was the truth. Emily was concerned about him, but not for the reasons Marisa believed.

Marisa squeezed Emily's hand. "I know how difficult it is, worrying about him. At least you know when he does return, he will return to you."

Emily saw the sadness in her friend's eyes, knew the reason behind that lingering pain, and felt even worse for her own deception. Marisa deserved more from her. She deserved her complete honesty. Yet Emily knew that honesty would only prove a burden.

Lady Harriet smiled as she joined them. "Mari, dear. I believe Mr. Haverleigh is looking for you. Did you perhaps promise him this dance?"

Marisa looked surprised. "No. I'm certain I did not."

Lady Harriet patted her arm. "Would you be a dear and dance with him, before he starts following you about like a lost lamb? I'm afraid he will run into one of the potted palms the way that Carsten boy fell into the refreshment table at the Andover ball last April. As I recall he was trying to slip past one of your beaux and ended up with a tray of cake on his head."

"I always find it remarkable the way certain gentlemen can make complete cakes of themselves." Marisa laughed, the sound melding with the music. She squeezed Emily's hand before leaving her alone with Lady Harriet.

"Mark my words, that handsome child shall cause a riot one day." Lady Harriet took Emily's arm. "The gentleman

who wins her hand shall do us all a service.”

Emily didn't resist as her grandmother led her to a nearby alcove, where two gilt trimmed chairs sat beneath a large gilt trimmed mirror. She remained standing, holding Emily's arm, smiling as though she had something pleasant to discuss. Yet the hard glitter in her green eyes told Emily another story.

“Emily dear, you look as though you are waiting to be marched to the gallows. We don't want your guests wondering what is wrong with you. Do we? You didn't share our little secret with Mari. Did you?”

“No. But I do so wish I might.”

“We agreed not to share this with anyone. And I do mean anyone. You must remain strong.”

“Look at all of these people, Grandmama,” Emily whispered, her voice nearly drowned by the bright notes flowing from the orchestra perched high in the minstrels' gallery on the far side of the room. “They all believe this monstrous lie.”

Harriet squeezed Emily's arm. The warmth of her palm radiated through the buff kid leather, like a brand against Emily's cool skin. “May I suggest the rather obvious fact that we want them to believe this monstrous lie?”

“I know. I simply didn't realize it would be this difficult. I despise deceiving everyone.”

Harriet laughed softly, as though Emily had just said something witty. “You have little choice but to grow accustomed to deception, my dear. At least in this matter.”

“I keep thinking of how disappointed Mama and Papa would be if they knew the truth of what I have done.”

“Precisely why I suggest we never allow them to discover the truth. I doubt they would have much sympathy for either one of us.”

Emily watched her parents as they glided through the steps of a cotillion. Small, with dark hair and green eyes, Audrey Maitland looked like a young girl dancing with her first love. The way she gazed up at her tall, fair haired husband mirrored the adoration in Hugh Maitland's brown eyes as he smiled down at his handsome wife.

Emily had never seen a couple more in love than her parents. Growing up with that love as a standard for what she expected from her future marriage was part of the reason Emily found herself in this horrible situation tonight. She had tried desperately to prevent this lavish party. Yet, her parents had insisted. She truly believed they wanted to prove to the world their eldest daughter had finally managed to comply with their wishes.

“I didn't realize how difficult it would be to face everyone and maintain this illusion we have created. I feel as though I'm betraying everyone. I know I would feel better if I could tell Mari and Meg. And Anna. I have never in my entire life kept a secret from Anna.”

“Only three people? You would force only three of the girls you care most about to share your burden?”

Emily moistened her lips. “I know. It is selfish to even think of it.”

“Fortunately, Mari and Meg are both leaving tomorrow. So the temptation to tell them will be gone. As far as your sister, you know that dear child could never bear the weight of a deception such as this.” Harriet tightened her grip on her granddaughter's arm, her fingers pinching the skin beneath Emily's short sleeve. “Emily, look at me.”

Emily tore her gaze from her trusting parents to look into her grandmother's taut features. The few silver threads that streaked her dark red hair, the lines that crinkled at the corners of her eyes could not steal Harriet's beauty, even though she was past sixty. Just how far past sixty she had progressed, no one knew. Lady Harriet Whitcomb, the dowager Countess of Durrington, believed every woman should keep a degree of mystery about her.

“I expect you to play your role well. You are not a green girl.”

Emily cringed at the reminder of her age. In three months she would attain the advanced age of three and twenty. She needed no reminders of the fact she was beyond the first blush of youth.

“You are not going to do anything foolish, are you my girl?” Harriet's eyes were filled with an uneasy mixture of dread and determination. “You shall remember you convinced me this was your only hope. And of course, you will bear in mind that both of our reputations are now at stake. Your parents trusted me to guide you safely through London society.”

The responsibility of her deception rested across Emily's shoulders like an iron yoke. If the truth were ever discovered the scandal would not only ruin Emily and her grandmother, but her entire family. No, she was far too tangled in her own web of lies to hope of escaping. She looked into her grandmother's worried eyes and managed a smile. “I would do nothing to jeopardize my parents' trust in you. I will not fail you.”

“Of course you won't.” Harriet dropped her hand and frowned at the red marks her fingers had left on Emily's arm below the emerald silk of her short sleeve. “You are after all my granddaughter. The only one of your sisters who had the excellent sense to inherit my looks.”

Emily rubbed the tingling flesh of her upper arm. “Mother has always said my temperament is related to my red hair.”

“Yes, well, you have also inherited my unfortunate propensity for being just a bit headstrong.” Harriet flicked open her fan, the gilt trimmed edge glittering in the candlelight. “Still, all in all, I am quite satisfied with how you have turned out, even if you are a trifle stubborn at times. You are, after all, quite an Original. Indeed, you remind

me remarkably of myself at your age.”

Emily smiled as she thought of how her penchant for rich colors and medieval decoration had set her apart in the eyes of the *ton*. After her first disastrous Season, she had fashioned a mask of sophisticated elegance to protect herself from the horde of foppish bores, arrogant aristocrats, and charming fortune hunters that swarmed London. She had yet to find a gentleman interested in looking beyond the mask to the woman beneath.

“I have faith in you. And I believe you were justified in doing what you did. If not, I never would have agreed to this. Your parents were being quite unreasonable.”

“Thank you, Grandmama.”

Lady Harriet smiled. “Your parents were foolish to think they could control you in this manner. In a very real sense they brought this about. You must keep that in mind. I assure you, I keep reminding myself of all the reasons for this deception.”

Emily nodded. “I shall remain strong. I know what is at stake.”

“Grandmama! Emily!”

Emily turned as her sister Annabella glided toward her, her pale hair glowing in the golden candlelight cascading from the chandeliers.

“Is it not a wonderful party?” Anna waved her fan in an elegant sweep of the ballroom. “I cannot wait until my first London ball. I do hope it’s all I imagine it will be.”

Harriet smiled. “My dear, I am quite certain you will enjoy London. And London shall adore you.”

“Do you think so?” Anna clutched her fan to her chest. “They won’t think me too countrified?”

“They will think you a diamond of the first water.” Harriet smoothed her fingers over Anna’s flawless cheek. “You shall be a great success, my dear.”

A blush rose to brush a pink stain across Anna’s cheeks. “Oh, I do hope so.”

“We shall make certain of it.” Harriet snapped her fan closed. “Now, my sweetings. I see Lady Chadwick has arrived, and I really must speak with her.”

Emily watched her grandmother wend her way through the crowd surrounding the dance floor, making her way to where Lady Chadwick stood near the base of the three curving stairs leading from the entrance of the room into the swirling mass of people below. People stood aside to allow Lady Harriet passage as she sailed like a queen across the crowded room in her gown of dark blue sarsenet. No matter what, she would not betray her grandmother. She certainly would not risk a scandal. There was far too much at stake. It would all be fine. She simply had to keep her wits and...

A military man dressed in full regimentals walked through the entrance of the ballroom. He stood for a moment on the top stair, framed by the white arched entrance, looking across the room like a hunter seeking prey. Emily watched as he descended the stairs, a tingling sensation rippling through her. It was like watching a hawk descend into a covey of doves. Even from a distance she could sense an aura of danger about this man. She could imagine him astride a huge black stallion, like a knight of legend, leading his troops into battle. Looking at this commanding man she had little doubt he had only recently left the battlefields of the Peninsula.

Candlelight slipped golden fingers into his black hair, the glossy mane curling in luxuriant waves over his collar. The fringe of his golden epaulets dangled like gilt in the candlelight, emphasizing the incredible width of his shoulders. White braid marched down the front of his short coat, the blue wool hugging the planes of his wide chest. A gold dress sword brushed the side of his thigh, buff colored breeches molded the muscular curves of his long legs before plunging into shiny black Hessians. One look and Emily forgot to breathe.

“Emily, there is something I have been meaning to ask you ever since you returned from London last week,” Anna said.

“What?” Emily stared, her gaze never wavering from the tall, dark haired man who was making his way across the room. He moved with the easy elegance that came when strength blended with agility. Power rippled with his every stride. This was a man men would follow into hell. And women would wait breathlessly for his return.

“I have been worried.”

“Worried?” Emily noticed heads turn as the officer made his way through the crowd. Women cast admiring glances his way. Men gazed with a touch of envy at this tall, powerful figure. Who was he? She was quite certain she had never met him. Oh no, she would never have forgotten this man. Even if she had merely glimpsed him before.

“I have been wondering about something.”

Anna kept her voice so low Emily had to incline her head to hear her sister. Anna was several inches shorter than she was, small and delicate, a perfect flower of the *ton*. “What is it?”

“About your marriage.”

Emily’s muscles tensed. No one knew her better than Anna. She couldn’t possibly suspect anything. Could she? “What about my marriage?”

“Emily, you didn’t abandon your dream did you?”

“Dream? What do you mean?”

“You didn’t marry simply to allow me to have my first Season, did you?” Anna twisted her fan, crinkling the ivory lace trim. “Oh Emily, I do hope you married only because you found a gentleman you truly loved. I know how much you wanted me to go this year. I know you would put my situation above your own. I do hope you didn’t marry out of a sense of duty.”

The concern in her sister’s huge blue eyes tugged on Emily’s heart. Even though she was four years Anna’s senior, they had always been close, sharing their hopes and dreams. In fact, this was the first time she had ever kept a secret this important from her sister. Still, Emily knew she could not lay this burden on anyone, not her sister, not her closest friends.

“You must not fret about me.”

“But Emily, it all happened so quickly. An elopement! Emily, you do love your Major Blake, do you not?”

Emily glanced down to the embroidered ivory lace edging one short sleeve of her sister’s pale pink silk gown. “You and I made a pact. Remember? Neither of us would ever marry unless we were as deeply in love as Mama and Papa are.”

“I know. But, I also know how hard you fought to have Mama and Papa send me to London this Season, even though I wanted you to go. I could not live with myself if I thought you had married someone simply because of me.”

“Then it’s time you stopped torturing yourself. I certainly didn’t marry a man I did not love.”

“Then it’s true?” Anna’s eyes pleaded for the confirmation of her hopes. “He swept you off your feet?”

Emily took Anna’s hand in hers. All the lies made sense when she looked into her sister’s sweet face. The chance to see Anna happy was worth the price of her own integrity, she assured herself. “I knew Major Sheridan Blake was the answer to my prayer.”

Anna sighed, the strain leaving her beautiful face. “And do you tremble when he touches you?”

“It’s difficult to say how he makes me feel.” Emily glanced past Anna’s shoulder to where the officer was greeting her parents near one of the two refreshment tables in the room. In some strange way this man had stepped straight out of her fantasy. This is how she imagined Major Sheridan Blake would look, if he truly existed. He didn’t of course, that was the problem. Emily had invented him.

“You always said that for each of us there is one person destiny has meant us to meet,” Anna said.

“Only one.” Emily drew in a breath that trembled in her lungs as she stared at the officer. There was something about him, an aura of command, a strength she could sense all the way across the room.

“And now I know it’s possible. I can find that one special man destiny has meant for me.”

“Of course you can. We must never settle for anything less than to marry for affection, Anna. And we must be very careful not to be tricked by clever frauds.”

Anna touched her arm. When Emily glanced down at her sister she saw admiration shimmering in her eyes. “I only hope I can be as strong as you are, Emmie. I know how much Mama and Papa want to see each of us settled. But what happened to you that first Season frightens me.”

“When you think of the lifetime you will spend with your husband you will know you cannot live with an imitation of love. You must trust yourself. If something feels wrong, it is. When you meet the right gentleman, you will know.” Emily would never settle for anything less than true affection. And that is where she had run into a difficult dilemma.

Hugh and Audrey Maitland had insisted Emily have the opportunity to marry before any of her four younger sisters would be allowed to have a Season. In this her parents were every bit as stubborn as she was. They could not accept the fact she should have the right to make her own decisions. The fate of her poor sisters had depended upon Emily choosing a husband.

Emily really didn’t understand why her parents could not see she knew what was best for everyone in this situation. She had a right to determine her own path in life. If it took years to find the right man, then her parents should allow her the time. If she never found him, they should allow her to don a cap and live the life of a spinster. She should not be punished for wanting to live life on her own terms. Her sisters should be allowed to enter Society, even though their older sister was still unmarried. Yet her parents simply could not be made to see reason. And Emily certainly could not allow her parents to punish her sisters for her choices. This year the guilt had nearly broken her; she had very nearly accepted a man she didn’t love to ease the guilt and free her sisters. Still, desperation had found a path.

Instead of accepting a man she didn’t love, Emily had devised what seemed a perfect plan—she had married a fantasy. Three weeks ago, she had given this fantasy a name she had borrowed from a popular playwright and one of her favorite poets. Sheridan Blake became an army officer who had been in London for a few days before heading back to the Peninsula, just long enough to elope with Emily. At least that was the fairy tale she and her grandmother had concocted. It seemed a perfect solution to her dilemma.

Of course, Emily didn’t plan to stay married to her fictitious husband forever. She fully intended to become a

widow after a few weeks. Sheridan Blake would die in battle, a casualty of war, his body lost on a distant battlefield. As a widow she would be free to make her own choices. Perhaps one day she might even meet the one man she was meant to marry. She could attend the Season as a widow. Her sisters could find their destiny without her blocking their path. It had been a difficult choice, born of desperation, but this deception had been her salvation.

Emily stared across the room to where the army officer was talking with her parents. She could tell even from a distance this was the type of man she had always dreamed of meeting. Honest. Brave. Loyal. The type of man a woman could trust with her dreams. Who was he?

“You always were the impetuous one, Emmie.”

Impetuous. Desperate really. Determined to live life on her own terms without hurting anyone. Who was that officer? She watched the officer press his lips to her mother’s hand. Why had she never met him before?

“An elopement, imagine. How utterly romantic.”

“Yes. Very romantic.”

Odd, her mother and father were greeting this man as though he were a long lost son. Father couldn’t seem to stop shaking his hand. Mother was staring up at this dark haired officer with something close to awe. If her parents knew him so well, why hadn’t they ever introduced her to this intriguing man? Was he married? Oh please, don’t let him be married. Dear heaven, she was married! She supposed her poor husband might meet his fate earlier than she had anticipated.

They were coming this way. Mother was leading the officer her way, while Father was headed for the spiral staircase leading to the minstrels’ gallery at the back of the room. Emily’s heart crept upward in her chest until each beat throbbed at the base of her throat. Oh my goodness, she couldn’t breathe.

“Emily, my goodness.” Anna touched Emily’s arm. “Look at the officer walking this direction with Mama.”

Emily wasn’t merely looking at the man, she was staring. She couldn’t help herself.

“He is really quite dashing.” Anna whispered. “In a dark, formidable way. I suppose he wouldn’t be the fashion in London. Still, I think him handsome. Remarkably so.”

If society measured male perfection by the soft, petulant, pretty looks of Lord Byron, this man was far from ideal. There was nothing soft in the finely sculpted lines and curves of this man’s face. Nothing petulant in the sensual curve of his finely molded mouth. Nothing pretty in the overall effect of towering strength and bold masculinity.

He was compelling. Mesmerizing. Overwhelming. Handsome was such a mild word to employ for this man. Emily had never seen a more blatantly attractive man in her life. Here was a warrior who could easily have stood before her in polished armor awaiting a token from his lady to take with him into battle.

“Emily, look who is here!” Audrey rushed toward her daughter, clutching the army officer’s arm as though she were afraid he might get away from her. “It’s such a marvelous surprise.”

Emily glanced at her mother, dazed by the presence of this bold warrior. Why was her mother so surprised to see this man?

“Emily, darling.” Audrey hugged Emily, then stepped back, pressing her hand to the base of her neck. “I can see you are overwhelmed.”

The tears welling in her mother’s eyes startled Emily’s already confused senses. “Mother, I don’t understand what...”

Emily’s words dissolved in a gasp as the officer gripped her shoulders in his big hands and drew her near. She caught a glimpse of his smile, a glimmer of the amusement in his eyes as he lowered his head and kissed her.

Emily had been kissed before. The mistake she had made years before had allowed one gentleman the presumption to kiss her. It had happened once. Broxburn had held her hands and touched his lips to hers. It had all been over in a heartbeat. As she recalled it was cool and dry and had left her wondering why kissing was considered scandalous. Now she understood.

He slid his firm lips across hers, slow, deliberate, as though he had every right to kiss her, as though he had every right to do more. Shock and confusion solidified into a shimmering excitement within her. This was a kiss straight from her wildest fantasy. This was a bold knight claiming his lady. Not with cold steel and brute strength. But, with the intoxicating elixir of a single kiss.

He wore no cologne. Yet a beguiling aroma of leather and wool mingled with a clean fragrance of bayberry, blending into a scent that was entirely masculine. A scent that teased her. A scent that made her want to press her face against his neck and fill her senses with his essence.

The music and voices in the room dissolved into the distant roar of her own pulse pounding in her ears. Although he didn’t hold her pressed against his chest, she could feel the heat of him, the strong radiant warmth of his body stroking hers through the emerald silk of her gown. And for some inconceivable reason, she sought that warmth, her body instinctively leaning toward him.

She felt a shifting within her, a yielding of muscles that made her sway until she could feel the press of his chest against her breasts. Sensation shimmered with the contact, a delicious ripple of excitement spiraling through her in

all directions, like sparks escaping a flaming pinwheel. He tightened his grip on her arms holding her close for an instant. Only an instant. And then he was pulling away, leaving her breathless and hungry for more.

She stared up at him, stunned by her virulent reaction to him. In that instant she saw a flicker of what could have been confusion in his eyes, melding with the heat of a desire she could recognize even in her innocence. Who was this man?

“I have missed you, Em.” He smiled, his lips curving upward, a single dimple slicing into his tanned right cheek.

The sounds in the room faded into a distant buzz in her ears. Her entire world seemed nothing more than this man. She stared at him, stunned by her overwhelming response to this man. For one extraordinary moment she wondered if he had indeed stepped straight from her fantasy. “Missed me?”

His eyes sparkled with a bedeviling light, an intriguing sense of mischief and a promise of more. “I have missed you more than words can say.”

The bright notes of the orchestra faded only to erupt in a stunning crescendo. A moment later her father’s voice cracked like a whip in the room. Emily flinched, as though she were coming awake with a sharp slap across her face.

“Ladies and gentlemen, please give me your attention for a moment.”

Her father’s voice sliced through the fog clouding Emily’s mind. Reality swept through her with a vengeance. Dear heaven! The stranger had kissed her. What was worse, she had kissed him back, as though she had known him a thousand years. What would people think of her kissing a stranger in this manner? Especially now, when she was a married woman?

She glared at the man. “What the devil do you mean by...” her words dissolved in a startled exhale of breath as this tall stranger pressed his fingertip to her lips.

“Hush sweetheart, your father has an announcement to make.”

Emily frowned as she glanced to her mother, looking for support in her indignation, finding none. The world suddenly seemed to be spinning in the wrong direction. A man had kissed her. Here in her own home, in the middle of the ballroom. Why was her mother smiling? She glanced around her. Four hundred people stood in the huge room, staring up at the minstrels’ gallery, where her father stood at the black wrought iron balustrade, commanding the attention of everyone present. Something was wrong. Something was very wrong.

“Mother, I...”

Audrey raised her hand, cutting off any words Emily might say. “Emily, your father is speaking.”

Emily stared up at her father, feeling as though she were trapped in some odd dream. Only she knew all too well she was wide awake. What the devil was happening?

“As you all know we are here tonight to celebrate the marriage of my daughter Emily to Major Sheridan Blake, who is in service to His Majesty, King George the Third.” Hugh paused a moment, staring down at his guests, his lips curved into a smile. “It seems we thought the major was unable to attend tonight, due to a prior engagement in the Peninsula.”

*Thought the major was unable to attend.* Emily stared up at her father, an uneasy shiver skittering up her spine, a sense of impending disaster settling over her, like a heavy cloak.

“Through a twist of good fortune.” Hugh’s smile grew as he looked to where Emily stood near the back of the room and raised his arm in her direction. “He was able to join us tonight. It’s my great pleasure to introduce all of you to my new son, Major Sheridan Blake.”

## Chapter Two

EMILY DROPPED HER fan. The ivory sticks hit the tip of her emerald satin slipper and plunked against the polished oak planks of the floor. She stared up at the stranger who had slipped his arm around her shoulders. “What the devil do you...”

He touched her cheek, quelling her protest with a soft touch. “I know this is a surprise.”

“Oh Emily, this is wonderful!” Anna said.

“Emily, he is everything you said, and more,” Audrey said, squeezing Emily’s hand. “I’m so happy.”

“But, you don’t understand. This man is…” Emily could manage no more as the guests began descending upon her and the imposter by her side. Smiling faces of friends and family swirled in her dazed vision. Voices buzzed in her ears.

“Oh, what a charming couple.”

“Always knew it would take a strong man to win Emily’s hand.”

“How fortunate you could return, Major.”

“You are a fortunate young man.”

“Oh, Emily. I can see how he swept you off your feet.”

Emily’s thoughts whirled. She received the good wishes of her guests as though she moved through a dream. Stunned. Speechless. This was impossible. This could not be happening. She felt as though she had been yanked from the ground by a whirlwind. Her head reeled. Her heart pounded against the wall of her chest. She had to stop this!

Her father stepped from the chattering crowd that had gathered around Emily and the man claiming to be her husband. “You have made me very happy, daughter,” he said, touching her cheek.

“Father, this man…”

“Counts himself among the most fortunate men in the world,” the imposter said, holding Emily close to his side. “To have the honor of your daughter’s hand in marriage.”

Emily glanced up into eyes as dark as a moonless night at midnight. There was amusement in those endless depths, and a subtle warning that stole the words of protest she had meant to speak. He trapped her with that look, and suddenly she felt like a dove held in the talons of a hawk.

Hugh turned to face the guests gathered around them. “This next dance is for my daughter and her husband.”

Emily was vaguely aware of the violins as they sang the first few phrases of a country dance. The man holding her shifted his grip, sliding his arm around her back as he led her toward the dance floor. Guests parted and formed an aisle of smiling faces, like peasants seeking a glimpse of their Lord and Lady.

“Just what do you think you are doing?” Emily whispered.

“Leading my bride to the top of the set.”

She glared up at him. “Just what are you about, coming in here, pretending to be my husband?”

“Pretending?” He gave her a look filled with cultivated innocence, a look completely at odds with the roguish glint in his eyes. “Why Emily, I assure you even though we were married in haste, everything is quite legal.”

“We were never married.” She kept her voice low, acutely aware of the couples who were forming the set nearby.

“I know I have been away for more than a fortnight, but I’m shattered to think you could have forgotten that one glorious night we shared.”

“Oh, will you kindly stop talking such nonsense!” She managed to keep her voice low when she wanted to scream.

“Emily, how you wound me,” he said, his grin spoiling the melancholy in his voice.

Oh she wanted to slap that mocking smile right off of his handsome face. “Not yet. But, I will have you know, I am quite capable of using a pistol.”

He laughed, the deep tones rippling with the bright sounds of the music. “I find I’m trembling in my boots.”

“How dare you come in here and play this loathsome game?”

“Game? My darling bride, I’m afraid you have me at a loss.”

Emily halted in the middle of the dance floor, ashamed to find she was trembling. “I have had all I intend to take of your insolence. I believe it’s time to announce you as a fraud.”

“That would not be wise.”

“Oh, and why pray tell?”

He smiled, a lazy curve of full lips that reminded her keenly of how those sensual lips had felt moving against hers. He leaned toward her, his voice meant for her ears alone. “Because your family and guests would be quite distressed to discover you had deceived them into believing you were married.”

She stared up into his eyes, seeing the reality of her situation mirrored in the dark depths. Did he know everything?

“Yes sweetheart, I know everything.”

A squeak escaped her lips. She stared up at him, as horrified as a witness to a deadly carriage accident. Dear heaven, how had he discovered the truth? What did he want? If he whispered the truth to anyone, her entire family would suffer. The scandal would ruin her sisters.

He grinned, that solitary dimple peeking at her. “Smile sweetheart. We don’t want people to think you don’t like me.”

Emily allowed him to lead her to the top of the set. She stood trembling as the other dancers took positions. He



took her hand and led her down the line of dancers, as though the room were not whirling around them. Through the white kid of his glove, the heat of his hand seared her hand through her glove, his warmth seeping into her blood. Through the anger and fear pounding with each swift beat of her heart, she recognized something far more disturbing: excitement. An odd sensation swept over her when she looked at him. It was as if she had lived her life viewing the world through a fine veil, all the colors muted until this moment. With one touch he had lifted the veil from her eyes, allowed her to see vibrant color for the first time.

The dance separated them. He looked so sure of himself, in command, while she felt as though she might shatter at the slightest touch. She noticed her parents standing on the edge of the dance floor watching her. The room was filled with family and friends. Everyone thought this stranger was her husband. What the devil was she going to do? She wasn't sure how she managed, but she moved through the steps of the dance, as though her body were completing the task without benefit of any direction from her disordered thoughts. At the end of the dance, he took her hand and looked down at her.

"I believe it's time you and I find a place to speak privately." He slowly slid his thumb over her knuckles in a gesture meant to soothe.

His gentleness was lost in the storm of Emily's emotions. Still, she didn't resist as he took her arm and led her from the dance floor. She glanced around the room, spotting her parents sitting together on an ivory Grecian chaise longue that stood against one of the pale green walls. Her parents had always done what they thought was best for her. They loved her. They trusted her without question. What would they think if they knew she had deceived them? Her stomach soured as she realized how much pain she would cause them. And her entire future rested in a stranger's hands.

Lady Harriet met them as they left the dance floor. She stepped before them, halting like a palace guard in sapphire blue. "Just where do you think you are going with my granddaughter, *Major Blake*?"

Even though her grandmother kept her voice low, Emily flinched at the venom in her tone. She glanced up at her tormentor. The man didn't look the least bit intimidated by a woman who had a reputation for freezing an opponent with a single glance.

"There is much we need to discuss, Lady Harriet," he said, his dark voice low and filled with command. "I believe you have a stake in all of this. Please join us."

Harriet looked at Emily, sudden doubts clouding her expression. "Emily?"

Emily moistened her dry lips. "He knows."

Harriet closed her eyes, her lips moving in a silent oath. When she opened her eyes she revealed nothing of her emotions; only a tightening of her lips betrayed her anger. "Very well. Follow me."

Emily's mind churned as she followed her grandmother out of the ballroom and down a hallway where candles flickered behind glass in the wall sconces, casting wavering shadows against the mahogany paneled walls. She had weaved every inch of this terrible tangle. Now it threatened to strangle her grandmother as well as her entire family. Not for the first time in her life she cursed her own impetuous nature.

Emily set her jaw as she entered the library behind her grandmother. The comforting scents of leather and parchment curled around her. She stared at the man who strode into the room beside her. Under other circumstances she would find much to admire. The man carried such a sense of command, as though he could control any situation, bend the very elements to do his bidding. Formidable. And he was her enemy. Heaven help her, somehow she would find a way to wipe that maddening grin off of his beguiling lips.

"I suppose I should be glad you are not carrying a pistol at the moment." He touched the tip of her nose with his fingertip. "You look angry enough to shoot me."

"An excellent idea." She stepped back. "Shall we meet at dawn?"

He tilted his head, smiling at her in a way that added a beat to her racing heart. No doubt about it, the man was a dangerous opponent.

"Lovely lady, I would meet you any time. Of course, pistols would not be the sport I had in mind."

Emily turned away from him, aware of how his bold words brought warmth to her face. Oh she wanted to hang the man! She marched to one of the open windows, welcoming the cool evening breeze against her warm cheeks.

Harriet closed the library door, squeezing the music that flowed from the ballroom into a trickle of shivery notes. She stood for a space of a dozen heartbeats, glaring at the man with her most glacial stare. Yet he only smiled in return. "Now then, young man. Just what is it you believe you know?"

He strolled to the fireplace and rested his arm along the smooth white marble mantle, as though he were master of the house. On either side of the mantelpiece, carvings of Apollo and Venus stood with heads turned toward the rogue, staring as though fascinated by this mortal within their midst. "I know you and Emily invented Major Sheridan Blake three weeks ago."

"What nonsense is this?" Harriet demanded.

"We are beyond the point of denial, Lady Harriet." He smoothed the tips of his long fingers over the marble

beneath his hand. “I know you had your solicitor obtain a special license for marriage between Major Blake and your granddaughter. He also paid a magistrate to forge marriage papers. I, by the way, have those papers locked away for safe keeping.”

He truly did know everything. The blood drained from her limbs as Emily realized she was well and truly trapped. She rested her hand on the back of a wing back chair, her fingers digging into crimson brocade. “How did you discover all of this?”

“It doesn’t matter.” He glanced up at the elaborate marble chimneypiece above him where Jupiter tossed Vulcan from Mount Olympus, father and son locked forever in conflict. “All that matters is I do know your secret. And we both know if the truth were ever told, you and your family would never again be able to enter polite society.”

Emily stared at the dark haired devil, wondering how she had ever believed he had stepped out of her fantasy. The man had come straight out of a nightmare. “I will not let you do this.”

He looked at Emily, holding her in a dark, penetrating gaze. “Although you might be reckless enough to jeopardize your own reputation, I doubt you would sacrifice Lady Harriet, or your sisters. Not to mention what the truth would do to your parents.”

Emily clutched the back of the chair. Impotent rage surged through her. How could he do this? She wanted to scream. She wanted to snatch a pillow from one of the sofas and toss it at him. How could she have been so wrong about this man? How could she have imagined he possessed all the qualities she had ever wanted in a man—honesty, bravery, loyalty. “Scoundrel!”

He smiled, a surprisingly gentle curve of his lips that softened the fierce look in his eyes. “I don’t want to hurt you or your family.”

“Liar.” Emily glanced away from him. She stared at the fire screen standing on a rosewood frame beside the hearth, where the delicate needlepoint stitches revealed a dark haired knight on his knee to his red haired lady. She had been thinking of her own true love when she had fashioned that screen. A man she had been so certain she would recognize with one glance. She had mistaken him once. And now she had managed to once again commit the same folly. Only somehow, in a fashion she didn’t understand, this felt worse. Somehow in the space of moments she had imagined her entire life with this man. Dear heaven, would she ever learn?

“Tell me, just what is it you do want?” Harriet asked.

He rested his foot on a brass andiron and stared into the lifeless hearth, the muscles of his leg flexing beneath the close fitting breeches. “I’m a soldier who has returned from the battlefields only to find he has no way of making a living.”

So, he truly was a soldier. Somehow Emily had known it. He wore the uniform and the look of a predator far too well. And there was more. There was a darkness she sensed inside of him, as though he had crawled his way out of hell but could not escape the memories. Somehow, in some perverse fashion, that darkness beckoned her. “Who are you?”

“It doesn’t matter.” He inclined his head, glancing up from the blackened streaks of fires long dead to give her a smile. “You can call me Sheridan Blake.”

*Sheridan Blake*, the man of her dreams. Emily crossed her arms below the high waist of her emerald gown. “I would prefer not to call you anything, except gone.”

He chuckled under his breath. “I’m afraid that is not an option.”

Emily gasped at his effrontery. How dare he laugh at her!

Harriet lifted her quizzing glass and studied him for a moment before dropping the glass, the lens swinging on a blue satin ribbon pinned beneath the high waist of her gown. “How much do you want?”

“Although you have a substantial income, I believe I can do much better as Miss Maitland’s husband.”

The full import of his statement hit Emily square in the chest, like a blow from a prize fighter. “If you think for one moment I will sanction your fortune hunting scheme you are very much mistaken.”

He looked at her, his eyes reflecting the light of the candles burning in the wall sconce above his head. “You need a husband, I need a position.”

“This is preposterous.” Emily paced the length of the library. She turned when she reached the glass fronted mahogany bookcases across from the smiling cad, her body trembling with fury. “I have no intention of allowing you to march in here and step into the role of my husband.”

He studied her a moment, a smile playing at one corner of his lips. “I believe you have little choice in the matter.”

“I have spent the last few years of my life avoiding fortune hunters like you. If you believe for one moment I shall agree to your demands, you are mistaken. I will...”

“Emily,” Harriet said, her voice cutting like lightning through Emily’s tirade.

Emily glanced at her grandmother. “What?”

Harriet tapped her fan against her open palm, candlelight shimmering along the gilt edge. “He has us at dagger’s point, my dear.”

“But I...” Emily hesitated, the reality of her grandmother’s words seeping through the fury fogging her mind. *Trapped*. He had slipped a noose around her neck and now his hand rested on the device to hang her. Worse still, he could destroy her family.

Emily stared at him, anger congealing inside of her with a terrible fear. Dear heaven, she had invented a husband to avoid marriage to a fortune hunter, only to find herself trapped by her own scheme. “Never in my life have I met a more contemptuous blackguard.”

“Calm yourself, my dear,” Harriet said. “There are a few matters we need to clarify with the gentleman.”

“Gentleman. Hah!”

Harriet ignored Emily’s outburst. “Now, I would like to clarify the terms under which we shall operate, Major. I understand you expect to live in this house as my granddaughter’s husband.”

“I would rather live with swine.” Emily glared at him, a look that had sent many a hopeful gentleman running for shelter. He grinned in reply.

“Emily, please control your temper.” Harriet tapped her fan across her palm. “This is a matter to be discussed with a cool head. I don’t believe I have to remind you who is responsible for this situation.”

Emily’s throat tightened. “No.”

“Now behave, while we negotiate a few points.”

“Grandmama, you cannot expect me to live in this house as his wife.”

“Relax, Miss Maitland. I have never in my life seduced an innocent woman. I’m seeking a position. Not your virtue.”

He might have slapped her across the cheek. He felt nothing for her. Nothing at all. While she had imagined him the life and blood of her fantasy. Oh, it was all far too humiliating to discover how very wrong she had been. One look and she had fallen under his sway. One touch and she had written a fantasy about him that started with *Once Upon A Time* and ended with *Happily Ever After*.

A fortune hunter!

Dear heaven, it was entirely too much to absorb. Emily sank to the edge of a couch that stood near the windows and listened as her grandmother made a bargain with the devil.

Harriet stared at the tall man standing near the lifeless hearth. “I will expect you to behave as a gentleman toward my granddaughter.”

“An intelligent man knows better than to get too close to an angry woman.” He smiled at Emily. “Especially a woman who likes pistols.”

“Yes well, my Emily does possess a temper. I’m afraid it’s something she inherited from me.” Harriet lifted one finely arched eyebrow. “You would do well to realize if you harm her in any way, I will find a way to make sure you are punished. Quite severely, Major.”

The arrogant rogue didn’t flinch as he held Harriet’s intense gaze. “As I said before, I don’t have a taste for seducing virgins.”

Harriet nodded. “I assume, since you will not find comfort with my granddaughter, you will seek companionship with some Cyprian or another. In doing so, I must insist you be discreet.”

“Grandmother!” Emily stared at Harriet, appalled at her grandmother’s meaning. “I cannot believe you are giving this man leave to carry on some tawdry affair while he is masquerading as my husband.”

“Well dear, he is a man. If you don’t plan to satisfy his needs, then I think we must be realistic in acknowledging the fact he shall have them satisfied elsewhere.”

“I will not have my husband consorting with some bit of muslin.”

“Emily dear.” Harriet addressed her as though she were speaking to a bewildered child. “He is not really your husband.”

“That is not at all the point.” Emily clasped her hands in her lap, trying to keep them from trembling. “What would people think if they discovered the man claiming to be my husband was seeking his pleasure in a brothel?”

“Precisely why I’m insisting he be discreet.”

“I will not have it.” Emily felt a shivering deep inside of her, where memories of past humiliations slithered from shallow graves. “My husband will not maintain a Ladybird.”

Harriet pursed her lips as she stared at Emily. “I doubt you shall have any say in the matter.”

Emily looked at the man who had invaded her life. He was watching her, a smile barely lifting one corner of his lips. He looked content with his own prowess, certain he could control the female in his midst. He would soon discover she was not so easily overcome.

“Are we agreed, Major?” Harriet asked. “You shall be most discreet in these matters?”

“I will do nothing to cause the lady any embarrassment.” He smiled, his lips curving into a devilish grin, mischief lurking in his expression. “It would not do to have people believe Miss Maitland is unable to satisfy her husband.”

Emily shot to her feet. “My husband will find no need to seek comfort in the arms of another woman.”

He shrugged, broad shoulders lifting beneath blue wool, golden epaulets glittering in the candlelight, a mockery of every ideal she had attributed to that uniform. "I can only wait to see if what you say is true."

Emily curled her hands into fists at her sides. "You shall wait until the sun freezes over."

He laughed, a dark rumble of sound that came from deep in his chest. "You display such passion. I must say I'm quite overwhelmed."

"Oh you miserable, contemptible swine!"

"Emily!" Harriet drew a breath in exasperation. "Please control your temper."

Emily opened her mouth to protest, but the stern look on her grandmother's face quelled her. She nodded, silently calculating ways she would repay the man for his insolence. Pity she didn't own a rack. Boiling oil would prove messy. She would think of something.

Harriet looked at him. "It seems there is little more to say. If you don't mind, I would like a few moments alone with my granddaughter."

"I'm certain the young lady will need some reminding of the advantages of playing along with this little drama." He looked to Emily, his gaze probing hers, as though he could pierce her defenses and read her mind. "Think of it this way, Miss Maitland, you need a husband as much as I need a fresh start. It's to our mutual benefit to cooperate with one another."

Emily lifted her chin. "I would never have taken a blackguard such as you as my husband."

"No? And here I thought we were rather well suited."

"In your wildest dreams."

He smiled, a wistful look entering his obsidian eyes. "Perhaps you are right."

A disturbing sense of despair settled over her as she watched him stride from the room. She couldn't quell that hopeful, terribly romantic girl within her from wishing things were different. If he were only the heroic figure he appeared, she could quite easily fall in love with him. As it was, he was her enemy. And she would find a way to best him.

Harriet spread her fan and stared down at the painted silk. "Quite an intriguing man."

"I find nothing intriguing about that man."

"No?" Harriet eyed Emily with a look that told her she knew otherwise. "I thought you might have found him quite exceptional."

"Perhaps, when I first saw him." Emily toyed with the gold satin ribbon at her bodice. "I might have thought him attractive. In a fashion."

"Yes, he is certainly that. He is quite easily one of the most attractive men I have ever met. And such a quality of command about him."

"Grandmama, you cannot possibly find anything of quality about the man."

"I believe you are mistaken, Emily." Harriet tilted her head, sapphire blue ostrich feathers bobbing in her hair as she stared at the space where the brigand had stood in front of the mantle. "I would wager he comes of excellent stock. You can see the aristocratic cast to his features, those high cheekbones, the sharp line of his nose, that strong jaw. And his address—learned from the cradle. I would not be surprised to find he is a second or third son of an English peer. Yes, I definitely can see the blood of nobility in him."

"Nobility!" Emily paced the floor as though testing the limits of her cage, crossing squares of gold edged in black, her satin slippers silent against the wool carpet. "That man is an out and out villain. A blackguard. A fiend!"

"I understand it can be very difficult for a man who wishes to leave the army these days."

Emily paused beside a globe that stood in a walnut stand in one corner of the room. "Grandmama, you are not suggesting you are in accord with the blackguard? He is blackmailing me into accepting him as my husband."

"Yes, well there is that." Harriet tapped her fan against her chin. "Pity, about the way he decided to barge into your life. He is such a splendid looking man. That face, those eyes. Not to mention his physique. My goodness, he is quite remarkable."

"His looks conceal a black soul." With a flick of her wrist Emily set the globe spinning. Her own lack of judgment infuriated her as much as the fact the man had failed to live up to her expectations. She was a fool. How could she ever have looked at the man and imagined him the embodiment of her dreams? "How do you suppose he discovered the truth? Do you suppose Beamish let it slip?"

"Never." Harriet was quick to defend her coachman. "He would never betray me."

"But Beamish took us to the magistrate. He is the only one who knew what we were about that night."

"Beamish has been with me for eleven years. I took him in when the world was through with him. When he could no longer amuse gentlemen with his performances in the boxing arena. When he had no place else to go. He would defend me and my secrets with his life."

Emily nodded, thinking of the big man with the flattened features who served her grandmother like a devoted mastiff. "How did he discover the truth? The magistrate must have told someone."

“Emily, it doesn’t really matter how he discovered the truth. The damage has been done.”

Emily groaned her frustration. “I cannot believe you agreed to that man’s demands without a fight.”

“Tell me, my dear, what did you expect me to do?”

“We cannot let him get away with this.”

“And what do you propose we do to prevent him from carrying on with his plan?”

“I don’t know.” Emily paced the length of the room, slapping the drapes as she passed the windows, setting heavy gold velvet swaying, brass curtain rings clanging. Oh she wanted to scream. She wanted to march into that ballroom and announce to the world he was a fraud. Of course she could do nothing. Nothing at all to prevent him. At least not at the moment. She might be in check, but the man would find it difficult to put her in checkmate. She paused at the fireplace, tapping her foot on the spot where he had stood. “I shall not allow that man to ruin my life.”

“Emily, you aren’t going to do anything foolish.”

“Of course not.” Emily lifted her chin, smiling as she imagined the day she would see her tormentor pay for his sins. “But, you can trust I shall think of a plan.”

Harriet rolled her eyes toward heaven. “I was rather afraid you were going to say that.”

Emily walked with her grandmother back into the ballroom. With each step she felt she was getting closer and closer to the gallows. It was difficult before he had marched into her world. Now it seemed impossible to keep the truth of this horrible situation from her friends. Perhaps she could avoid them for the rest of the evening. With that in mind, Emily headed to an alcove far from the dance floor, hoping to hide from the crowd.

“Emily.”

Emily froze at the sound of Margaret Drummond’s voice. She took a deep breath before she turned to face her friend. “You aren’t dancing?”

“There is an overabundance of young ladies here tonight.” Meg slipped her arm through Emily’s. “I only have partners for half of the dances.”

Emily knew the lack of partners was Meg’s decision. Tall and slender, with golden hair, green eyes, and a face that had inspired several sonnets written in her name, Margaret Drummond drew admirers the way a juicy roast attracts mongrels. Her icy demeanor with gentlemen only served as a challenge to many.

Although she had only attended four Seasons, Meg had already earned the reputation for being able to freeze a man at forty paces with nothing more than a lift of her eyebrow. Emily knew the reasons behind Meg’s disdain for those seeking her hand. Since her parents had all but ended their marriage, Meg was cautious concerning the possibility of a happy union. The fact she had fallen in love with a young man when she was only fifteen—a dashing soldier who served as her standard by which to judge all men—served to seal the door against most gentlemen trying to breach her defenses. Emily wondered what would happen when Alec MacLaren returned from war.

Although they each had their own reasons, Emily, Marisa, and Margaret all had gained the reputation for rebuffing the addresses paid to them by overly presumptuous gentlemen. Since the *ton* enjoyed bestowing epitaphs, a few years ago Emily and her two friends had discovered people called them *The Furies*—a title bestowed upon them by an arrogant gentleman intent on revenge for an imagined insult at Marisa’s hand. Emily and her friends had long ago found the title amusing rather than insulting. Anyone familiar with them knew the ladies never intentionally harmed anyone. The man masquerading as Sheridan Blake was another matter entirely.

“I can see how Major Blake caught your interest.” Meg glanced to where the imposter stood near one of the refreshment tables across the room. “He is quite dashing. I’m still surprised to know you eloped.”

It took every scrap of will to keep from blurting out the truth. Oh my goodness, it was so difficult to lie. “I find it all very hard to believe myself.”

“I wonder if he knows Colin.” Meg drew her teeth over her lower lip. “I haven’t heard from my brother in several months. Letters at times get lost. It’s so difficult to be so far away and not know how he is faring. I do wish this war would end soon. You must be so relieved to have Major Blake safe at home.”

Emily forced her lips into a smile. “You could never guess how I feel.”

Meg frowned. “Is something wrong?”

Emily wondered how anyone managed to carry on a deception such as this. Still, if she slipped, her entire family would suffer. “Everything is fine.”

“There you are. I have been looking for you.” Marisa strolled toward them, white silk rippling around her. She slipped her arm through Meg’s and smiled; a hint of mischief in her expression. “Emmie, I think you have done quite a shabby job of it this time.”

Emily froze. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“You neglected to say just how very handsome Major Blake was.” Marisa glanced to where the imposter stood near one of the refreshment tables. “Now that I have seen him, I understand how he managed to sweep you off your feet.”

Meg stared in the direction of the imposter. “I still don’t understand how he could have been at any party in

London and I didn't notice him. He is a man one would notice and remember."

"Precisely. Although, now that I have seen him, I cannot help but think he is familiar. I wonder if I have met him."

"I would think you would remember him," Meg said. "He does remind me a bit of Ashbourne. At least from a distance."

Marisa pursed her lips as she stared across the room to the tall man calling himself Major Blake. "I suppose that could be it. How in the world could he be in Town and we not know him?"

"Blake only appeared at the end of the Season." Emily swallowed past the knot in her throat. "Both of you had only just left Town."

Meg nodded. "That explains it."

Marisa smiled, her expression betraying a sense of playful curiosity. "Emily, you will have to excuse us. It's time Meg and I get to know your handsome major a little better."

Meg nodded. "I have a few questions I want to ask him. He has been far too mysterious."

"He certainly has." Marisa grinned, a dimple peeking out at the corner of her lips. "I believe it's time to learn all of his secrets."

*Secrets.* Before Emily could think of a reason to stay her friends, they were strolling away from her, headed straight for the tall man who had taken control of her life. Oh my goodness, she hoped he was good at deception. If he wasn't, everything was lost.

## Chapter Three

DECEPTION SUITED HIM. At least Simon St. James had learned to believe it suited him. In the past few years he had volunteered for one dangerous mission after another. All requiring an altered identity. All for crown and country. He hadn't really explored his reasons for taking such risks. Perhaps because he didn't want the answers. He didn't like to think he was still trying to impress a father who had tossed him away a long time ago.

Still, as he stood near a refreshment table in the ballroom watching Miss Maitland enter the room beside her grandmother, he admitted to a few qualms about playing the role of Major Sheridan Blake. Simon watched Miss Maitland, following her every move as she drifted through the crowded room. With her emerald gown and dark red hair Emily glided like an exotic tropical bird across a lake crowded by pale swans.

She was not handsome in the usual fashion. No, she was far above the ordinary mundane perception of beauty. She was handsome in a richly textured fashion. Even her eyes were far from ordinary. Those dark green eyes held golden flecks you could see only when you looked closely. She was filled with a fire he could sense, a fire that glimmered like those golden flecks in her beautiful eyes—a fire that could consume him if he got too close. He sipped his champagne, the wine crisp upon his tongue, the subtle bouquet brushing his nose with the bursting bubbles. He would have to be very careful with her.

"We have some lovely canapés this evening, sir. Chef's been fussing about 'em all day."

Simon smiled at the sound of that rusty male voice. He glanced over his shoulder, where a short man dressed in dark blue Maitland livery was replenishing a platter of canapés. The white wig he wore hid his thinning sandy brown hair, but couldn't disguise the thick jaw and alert brown eyes of Sergeant-Major Horace Digby.

Simon moved to the table and examined the platter of canapés. "So I see you have finally found a suitable station in life," he said, his voice kept low enough for Digby's ears alone.

"It ain't all bad, sir." Digby grinned, deep creases lining his sun darkened face. "A sight more comfortable than crawling through every smuggling hole in England. And the company is a damn sight better than your pack of smugglers, if I do say so myself. Learned to sleep with one eye open I did on that last mission."

"That pack of smugglers is providing a valuable service to the crown, Digby." Simon selected a thin wafer topped by a slice of lobster and red sauce. "The gentlemen now form a rather fine network of communication, providing a wealth of information for our commanders. If it hadn't been for them, we might never have discovered the smuggling being done through Maitland Enterprises."

"Aye, sir. Not many men would have seen the worth of using smugglers as spies, as you did sir." Digby cocked an

eyebrow as he looked up at Simon. “Most men might think they should be hanged.”

“Although there are many true brigands among those who ply illegal trade, I have found a surprising number of smugglers to be men loyal to their country. Men who feel they do a service by providing goods most people would not be able to obtain without their assistance.”

“Aye. There is that side to it. There’s a fair number of people here at home who like to sample a bit of smuggled goods.”

“It’s difficult to find someone in this country not buying contraband.” Simon glanced around the room, his gaze lingering on Emily Maitland, where she stood in discussion with two young ladies far from the dance floor. “Half the women in this room are wearing silk. And I would wager most of it came from France, even though they would swear it came from the East Indies.”

“Aye sir. I noticed even the lordships in the ministry carry silk handkerchiefs.” Digby frowned, as he transferred an oyster canapé from the tray he held to the silver platter on the table. “I would wager most enjoy a good cask of French brandy from time to time.”

Simon sipped his wine, his gaze drifting back to Miss Maitland. “I suspect the champagne might have arrived from France not long ago.”

“I saw the crates, sir. New from France they were.”

“Smugglers serve their purpose.”

“Aye. And no one can deny your pack of smugglers provide a fair amount of information on the Monster and his army.”

The sweet strains of the music melded with the sound of conversation and laughter in the large room. Emily wasn’t smiling. She looked as though she had eaten something that didn’t agree with her, her expression tense, her movements stiff.

Simon hoped Miss Maitland had a proper reply when people asked her what was troubling her, because someone was bound to ask her. The entire mission hinged on his ability to control the chit. He had an uneasy feeling no man could control that little termagant. Still, he had no other choice. He only hoped he could discover the identity of the traitor and get out of this hornet’s nest soon.

“Have you learned anything?” Simon asked.

“No more than what already came through the network, sir.” Digby placed another canapé on the platter with the care of a man building a castle made of cards. “We know someone in Maitland’s company must be involved in the smuggling being done, but I haven’t caught a whisper that might lead to the blackguard.”

Someone in Maitland’s organization was smuggling more than sugar and wool to the French. Someone was smuggling black powder and weapons in Maitland’s ships, weapons that were sending young Englishmen to early graves.

Simon’s breath stilled in his lungs with the memories stirring inside of him, ghosts that refused to remain buried: screams ripping through the air with the sound of gunfire, men and horses crying with their last breaths. The smell of battle: blood and mud and black powder. He had not chosen the life of a soldier, it had been chosen for him. He had chosen to do his best in the life he had been given. He was going to catch the traitor and personally escort him to the gallows.

“We know the cargo is initially destined to be shipped to a customer in Tangier. That customer is an agent for the French. We have to find out who he is.” Simon kept his voice low. “The weapons are stored in barrels of sugar. I suspect the crew of the merchant vessels have no idea what they are carrying. The traitor has to be someone who can control the shipments. Someone in a position of authority.”

Digby nodded. “I think you’re right about suspecting someone high up in the organization.”

The traitor could very well be Hugh Maitland. Simon could be the man who sent the head of this family to the gallows. If Maitland was a traitor, he would hang.

Simon glanced down into his glass, seeing his reflection in the golden wine, the image distorted by fine bubbles. At times he wondered who the man was who looked back at him. In the past few years he had lived by various names, insinuated himself into all manner of dangerous situations. But he had never before pretended to be the husband of an innocent female, if she was indeed an innocent maid. He wasn’t certain on that score. Still, no matter what Miss Maitland’s reasons had been in fashioning this masquerade, he would use it to his advantage. It was a mission like any other, he assured himself. He would do what needed to be done for crown and country, no matter how unsavory he might find his duty.

“Looks like you managed to make your way past the castle guards, sir.” Digby shook his head in wonder. “I’ll be telling you, I wasn’t of a mind the young lady would go along with your play acting.”

“I didn’t give her a choice in the matter.” Simon had spent most of his life in the army, hardly a profession that allowed a man sufficient opportunity to learn all the intricacies of a woman’s nature. If any man could ever learn all those intricacies. Still, instinct told him to watch his back with the red haired hellion. She was not the type to

surrender without a fight.

“She’s handsome, if you don’t mind me saying so, sir.”

“You can say anything you like about the woman, Digby.” Simon looked at the lady in question, noticing the way candlelight ignited the fire in her dark red hair. “Aside from allowing me access to her father, the little hell cat means nothing to me.”

“Aye.” Digby placed a canapé on the mound he was building. “But I’m thinking it will make the work go easier, being that you’re supposed to be her husband and all.”

“This is business.” Simon frowned as he realized he needed reminding of that fact when it came to Miss Emily Maitland. “The last thing I intend to do is to become involved with the woman.”

“Wise of you, sir.” Digby eased the last canapé onto the mound and stepped back to admire his creation.

Simon stepped aside as a young fair haired woman approached the table. She glanced up at him and then took one of the canapés. She smiled at him before returning to her friends standing a short distance away. The group of three young ladies looked his direction and then giggled. He suspected he was the topic of conversation on more than a few tongues this evening. He inclined his head in a small bow. The young ladies giggled once more then scurried away, slipping into the crowd.

Although at an early age he had been trained in all the proper behavior expected from a gentleman in society, the life he had been born to live had been altered by a man who despised him. Simon had seldom attended any function of polite society. He wondered how different his life would have been if he had been allowed to follow the path he had been born to follow.

“You know I’ve been thinking how strange it is that she came up with this counterfeit husband. I’m wondering why.”

“What man can fathom the workings of a woman’s mind?” Simon had his own theories as to the reason Miss Maitland had created a husband. As a married woman the female could carry on romantic liaisons without fear of the consequences, or the burden of a husband who might object.

“Strange. The lady coming up with an army officer as a husband. A Major even. And you being just that rank. Almost as if there was something more going on here than what meets the eye.”

Simon glanced down, meeting Digby’s smile with a frown. “You haven’t been talking to gypsies again have you?”

“No sir, I haven’t. But, I’m thinking it’s strange the way Miss Maitland described you to everyone, as though she knew you. Tall he is, she told her parents, with black hair and dark eyes. Just like you, sir. It’s strange if you ask me.”

It was odd, Simon had to admit. She had described Major Sheridan Blake as though she had met Simon and cast him in the role. The first time he had seen Miss Maitland had been a little more than a month ago, soon after he had received the assignment to investigate Maitland Enterprises. Since he was in London when he had received the assignment, he had decided to begin his investigation with the owner’s daughter.

In London he had kept his distance from Miss Maitland. Shrouded in the disguise of an elderly gentleman visiting from Italy, his connections through Lord Pemberton had allowed him access to every house in town. He had heard Miss Maitland and her two friends referred to as *The Furies*, apparently for their ability to cause pain and suffering to gentlemen who found their addresses rebuffed by the ladies. He wasn’t certain about pain and suffering, but from what he had observed while following her, Miss Maitland could freeze any gentleman who dared come within two feet of her. Even from a distance, she had fascinated Simon. She had tempted him to see what lay beneath that thick layer of ice. More than once it had taken all of his will to keep from discarding his disguise and approaching her.

The announcement of her hasty marriage to a soldier had hit him like a well delivered fist to the chest. How the devil had a mere soldier managed to win such a prize? He had told himself it was merely for the sake of the mission that had led him to investigate her sudden marriage. Yet, he had needed to know who had stolen her heart for reasons far more personal than he cared to admit. When he had discovered the truth, he had been more than a little astonished. Why had she invented a husband?

“It’s a bit of destiny I’m thinking, her inventing a husband that looks like you,” Digby said. “As though you were supposed to be meeting her.”

Simon frowned. “You know what I think of destiny and superstitions.”

“Aye sir. I know how you don’t believe in nothing you can’t see.” Digby chuckled to himself. “Still, it’s a strange thing it is, her choosing a military man who looks like you.”

“Coincidence. Nothing more.”

“I suppose you be right, sir.” Digby glanced up at him, humor glinting in his eyes. “Could have nothing to do with fate.”

“I suspect she chose a military man so she might become a widow. It would be more difficult to dispose of a Duke.” Still, it didn’t answer the question of why she had invented a husband in the first place.

“You make a good point, sir. It would be easy to kill off a soldier.”



Far too easy, Simon thought. Too many of his friends would never return from war.

“Still, her choosing a soldier who looked just like you. Now that is strange.”

“I want you to visit the various pubs along the waterfront.” Simon took charge of the conversation, directing it down a proper path. He would not dwell on Miss Maitland’s preferences in men. “We know a few of the smugglers have loose tongues when their gullets are full of rum. Otherwise, we might never have discovered this operation in the first place. See what you can find out.”

“Aye sir. Now if you don’t mind sir, I best get back to the kitchen, or I’ll have some explaining to do.”

Simon watched Digby walk away, the little man strutting like a rooster, his bowed legs encased in white stockings and dark blue velvet breeches. Digby was a good man, even if he was a superstitious fool. Nothing had brought him into Emily Maitland’s life, except a mission. A mission that could very well send her father to the gallows.

“Major Blake.”

Simon turned and found a young woman smiling up at him. His breath stilled in his lungs. Although she was without a doubt one of the most beautiful women he had ever seen, her beauty had not sucked the air from his lungs. He knew this woman, at least from a distance. He had heard tales of this woman from one of his closest friends. Did she know him?

Beside the exceptional beauty, stood a tall, golden haired young woman who regarded him with some degree of curiosity in her green eyes. She was every inch as handsome as the raven haired beauty. Together they could set a man’s head reeling. He had noticed both of these women in London. As he recalled Emily was usually in their company. These young ladies comprised the remainder of the three *Furies*.

“Lady Marisa Grantham,” she said, offering him her hand.

Simon took her hand and made a polite bow. “Lady Marisa.”

“Miss Margaret Drummond,” the other young woman said, offering him her hand.

Simon bowed over her hand, steeling himself for what might come next.

“I’m quite curious about you, Major,” Marisa said. “Apparently you are not precisely what you seem.”

Simon forced his lips into a smile. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“Do you not?” Marisa tilted her head, a thick raven curl brushing her pale shoulder. For a long moment she regarded him, her gaze filled with an obvious intelligence she didn’t try to hide. “Did you imagine you could do it without any consequences?”

A dozen scenarios raced through his mind. If she knew the truth, the mission was lost. “What is it you imagine I have done?”

“You ran off with our dear friend.”

“You appear to be a soldier when in reality you are a sorcerer.” Margaret smiled, all the ice fading from eyes the color of fresh spring leaves. “And you have apparently cast your spell over Emily.”

Marisa tapped her fan against her gloved palm. “Apparently, Meg and I had both left London a day or two just before you met Emmie, or we would have known all about you.”

“Now you must suffer the consequences,” Margaret said. “You must tell us everything.”

“How in the world did you manage to move through London without us ever meeting you?”

Simon drew in his breath. “I have spent little time in London. My family lives in Philadelphia.”

“I do hope they are safe,” Margaret said. “I understand the situation has become quite difficult.”

“It has. But my family is safe.”

“You were with the Royal Horse Guards.” Marisa stared at the insignia on his uniform. “I wonder if you might know a friend of mine. Major Clayton Trevelyan, Lord Huntingdon. I believe you served with him.”

He had served with Clay. He had been on several missions with the man after they had both volunteered for assignments that had placed them inside enemy territory. In fact, he had once spent three days crawling through the sewers of Paris with Clayton Trevelyan. In his time with Clay, during those moments at the end of a mission, when Irish whiskey had entered into the celebration of the fact they had survived, Simon had learned about Clayton’s brief engagement to the willful, capricious, beguiling Lady Marisa Grantham, a female who haunted his friend to this day. “He is a fine man.”

“Yes he is.” Marisa stared at his insignia as she continued. “I trust he was well when last you saw him.”

The last time he saw Clay was a little more than a month ago. They were at the Sea Turtle Inn just outside of London. As he recalled they had gone through three bottles of Irish whiskey that night. “The last time I saw him, he was fine.”

Although Marisa smiled, sadness lingered in her beautiful eyes. “I don’t suppose he mentioned any plans he might have for returning home?”

Lady Marisa was not entirely what he had expected. If he didn’t know the lady had cried off her engagement, he would suspect she still harbored deep feelings for his friend. “I’m afraid he did not.”

Marisa released her breath in a long sigh. “I suppose he plans to stay until the Monster is taken care of.”

“I couldn’t be certain.”

Marisa looked disappointed. “No I suppose not.”

“I wonder if you are acquainted with my brother, Major Colin Drummond.”

“I am. Our regiments served together. He was well last I saw him.”

Margaret moistened her lips, a glimmer of uncertainty crossing her features. “And do you also know Major Alec MacLaren? He and my brother have been friends since they were children.”

“A fine officer, Miss Drummond. He was also well when last I saw him.” Something in the lady’s expression told him she had more than a friendly interest in Major MacLaren. He didn’t wish to add to the lady’s concerns, but it had been months since he had seen either her brother or Major MacLaren.

“You must sit with us and tell us how you managed to win Emily.” Marisa took his right arm.

“We want to know everything. You must tell us how she caught your attention.” Margaret smiled up at him as she took his left arm. “I’m certain it must have been love the first time you glimpsed her.”

Simon knew the story Emily had told her family. This was not his first time impersonating another man for the sake of a mission. Still, he had an uneasy feeling his mask could be ripped away more easily than in other missions, simply because of how close he was to home.

The trick to surviving as a spy was to keep the attention focused elsewhere. Although Lady Marisa and Miss Drummond wanted to learn more from him, this might be an excellent opportunity to learn more about his beguiling bride. The more he knew of the enemy, the better chance he had to survive.

## Chapter Four

EMILY STARED INTO the mirror of her vanity, frowning at her own reflection as her maid worked a brush through the thick auburn curls. The ball was finally over. She wasn’t certain how she had managed to get through the evening without screaming the truth at the top of her lungs. Oh, she wanted to strangle the man.

The handsome deceiver had managed to charm them all. Her mother. Her father. Anna. Even Marisa and Meg had fallen under his sway. *Charming!* Both Mari and Meg had declared the imposter charming. Apparently he could tame the *Furies* with a smile. The other women in attendance this evening had also fallen victim to his charm. It seemed every foolish female in the room had felt compelled to tell her how handsome and dashing they found her husband. Everyone who had met the man had walked away admiring him.

“Did I hurt you, Miss?”

“No, Nellie.” Emily realized she had sworn under her breath. “I was just thinking of something, that’s all.”

Nellie nodded and returned to her task of brushing out Emily’s curls. “You have such thick hair, Miss; I always fear I’ll hurt you with the brushing.”

“She has beautiful hair. Just like my mother.”

Emily glanced over her shoulder. Her mother stood in the doorway that led to the hall, smiling at Emily. Once again she felt the weight of her lie press against her, as though it had grown to the size of Gibraltar. Never in her life had she kept a secret from her mother. Until now.

“That will be all, Nellie.” Audrey crossed the room. “I will finish taming my daughter’s wayward curls.”

“Aye, milady.” Nellie handed Audrey the brush, before leaving mother and daughter alone in the room.

The love and pride glowing in her mother’s expression as she looked down at her shamed Emily for her deception. She turned back toward the mirror, staring down at the intricate embroidery of roses and leaves rippling along the border of the Irish linen runner stretching the length of her vanity. What would her mother do if she confessed? She couldn’t of course. She couldn’t expose her family to the horrible scandal that would follow her confession.

“I haven’t done this in a long time.” Audrey lifted a handful of the dark red curls that tumbled to Emily’s waist. “Since you were a little girl.”

Emily traced the curve of a rose leaf she had embroidered in the white linen, as her mother stroked the brush through her hair. As a little girl she had always enjoyed her mother’s soft touch as she brushed her hair. Now, all she

felt was guilt for the lies that lay between them.

“I can tell you now that you are married, how very concerned I have been about you. More than I have been about the other girls.”

Emily looked up, meeting her mother’s gaze in the mirror. “Concerned? In what way?”

“You were always so terribly romantic.” Audrey smiled as she drew the brush through Emily’s hair. “I remember one time, when we took you and Anna to the ruins of Ravenwood Castle. I believe you were eight and Anna four. Annabella saw a dark, frightening place. You saw King Arthur’s Castle.”

“It’s a magical place.” Emily smiled as she thought of the Norman castle that stood at the far southern edge of her father’s property. “When I’m there, I can almost see Lord Ravenwood and his lady strolling about the grounds.”

“Yes. I know you can. You have a lush imagination, a firm belief in the truth of legends and myths. That is the main reason I feared you of all the girls were destined to be disappointed with life.”

“Why did you feel that way?”

“Annabella is a sweet, biddable girl. Many a nice young gentleman might fill her ideal of a charming husband. But you.” Audrey shook her head. “I always knew it would take someone very special to win your heart.”

Emily glanced to a small book lying near one corner of the vanity, black leather a blot against the white linen. The book of Shakespeare’s Sonnets had been a gift, given on the day she had agreed to marry a man she had imagined as her Galahad. She kept the book as a remembrance of the naive young woman she had been at seventeen. A talisman against future mistakes. “Do you believe I want too much from marriage, Mother?”

“Of course not.” Audrey rested her hand on Emily’s shoulder, her palm warming her through the layers of her wrapper and nightgown. “As you may recall, your father and I married against my father’s wishes.”

“Grandmama helped you elope.”

Audrey laughed softly. “She did. If she had not, I don’t know if I would have had the courage to marry my one and only love.”

“It’s rare, isn’t it? The kind of love you share with father. Not everyone is fortunate enough to find it.”

“Yes, I believe it’s rare. It takes meeting the right person at the right time and both of you recognizing the special feelings you share.” Audrey worked the brush through Emily’s hair, the movement tugging softly on her scalp. “I was always concerned you would allow your one mistake in judgment to blind you to any chance you might have of finding the right man. The man who could love you with all the love you have to give him in return.”

Emily had tried to overcome that first disappointment. She had gone to London each Season, hopeful, determined to find the man of her dreams. Yet, she had never found the right gentleman. In fact, long ago she had realized the truth: she had never truly fallen in love with anyone. Time had allowed her to realize she had merely been infatuated with Broxburn. Her first Season she had been out of her depth in London, a girl who had lived only through the adventures in novels, a country kitten tossed into an arena filled with wolves. When she looked back on it, she knew precisely how Broxburn had captured her interest.

“I’m so very glad you didn’t settle for anything less than a love match. After meeting your handsome young army officer, I can see you and Major Blake were meant for one another.”

Emily stared at the book of poems. “Can you?”

“Oh my goodness, yes. He has such an air of command about him. I can see him leading men into battle and fighting to bring them home again. Even though I haven’t your gift for the romantic, I can imagine him as a legendary knight of old.”

A dragon was more like it, Emily thought. A dragon who had seared her with a single kiss. Oh, she wanted to strangle the man.

“I’m so thankful your father and I insisted you attend the Season this year.” Audrey drew the brush across Emily’s head, the soft bristles stroking her scalp. “You have so much love inside of you, my beautiful child, so much spirit, so much to offer the right man. I could not bear it if you had given up your chance to find him. I cannot tell you how happy I am to see you settled so well.”

Her mother would be devastated if she ever learned this was all a terrible lie. Emily closed her eyes, guilt wrapping around her, steel chains binding her, until she could scarcely draw air into her lungs. She had forged the links of this deception; she must now wear the weight of it.

“I can tell you now; we intended to allow Anna to attend the Season next year, even if you didn’t find your young man this year.”

Emily looked at her mother’s reflection, meeting her gaze in the mirror. “You intended to allow Anna to have her first Season this coming spring?”

“You look shocked, my darling.”

“I thought you were going to keep sending me until my hair turned grey.”

Audrey laughed softly. “We could not very well allow Anna and the other girls to wither away. We didn’t tell you because we wanted you to apply yourself to the task of finding the proper gentleman.”

Emily stared at her mother, realization seeping into her blood like ice. “This would have been my last Season?”

“No. We would have allowed you to attend the Season as well as Anna. But, we felt you needed one more chance to find the proper gentleman, without any distractions.”

“Distractions?”

“I know you well.” Audrey squeezed Emily’s shoulder. “If you and Anna were in London together, you would spend all of your time trying to make certain Anna found the proper gentleman. You wouldn’t give your own situation a second thought. You have a most determined propensity for placing the needs of others ahead of your own. You have always been that way. And you always feel you know precisely what is best for everyone. At times you are blind to what might be best for you. And so we gave you one more Season to think of nothing more than your own happiness.”

Good God, she had made a mess of things. She had invented a husband for no reason at all. She flinched as someone knocked on the door.

“Ah, that should be your handsome husband.” Audrey laid the brush on the vanity and walked to the door.

Emily stood so quickly the chair wobbled. She snatched the back of the chair, her fingers clutching the lyre shaped rosewood. “What does he want?”

Audrey glanced over her shoulder, her lips curved into a gentle smile. “I suspect he wants to retire for the evening, dear.”

“In here?”

Audrey’s soft laughter rippled through the quiet room. “There is no need for modesty, Emily.”

“But...” Emily searched for a reason for her mother not to open that door. “Mother, I...He...We...I thought he might have his own chamber. He could sleep in one of the guest chambers.”

“Relax, my darling.” Audrey paused with her hand on the brass door handle, smiling at Emily. “I realize you and Blake didn’t have much time together before he had to leave, and you are still a little shy. But all of that will change now. You will have a lifetime to get to know each other.”

Emily stood beside the vanity, feeling trapped as her mother opened the door. Her heart tripped at the sight of him, this tall, broad shouldered warrior who strode into her room, his long strides filled with a powerful elegance. He was in a word magnificent. He was also a liar and a cheat, a blackmailer. She must not forget what lay beneath that infuriatingly handsome façade.

He smiled as he noticed her standing beside the vanity, a lazy curve of generous lips, his eyes sparkling with the devil’s own amusement. Oh, she wanted to hang the man.

“Have a pleasant night, darling,” Audrey said, before leaving the room.

Emily flinched at the soft click of the door. She lifted her chin and faced the blackguard, ready to do battle.

He arched one black eyebrow as he looked at her, the portrait of innocence, if Lucifer could ever manage to look innocent about anything. “You seem a little tense, sweetheart.”

“It comes from having a scoundrel turned loose in my bedchamber.”

He rested his shoulder against a carved mahogany post at the foot of her bed. “Now is that any way to talk about your husband?”

“You are not my husband.” Emily gripped the lapels of her dressing gown together, her fingers sinking into the sapphire blue silk. “And, if you think for one moment I will submit to...”

He held up his hand, halting her words. “I have never taken an unwilling woman to my bed and I don’t plan to start with you. I give you my word I will not try to force you to endure the repellent duties of the marriage bed.”

Did he truly find her so lacking he would not so much as try to seduce her? She hoped she didn’t look the way she felt—as though he had just slapped her across the cheek. “I feel so much more secure now, having the word of a man of such sterling character.”

He touched his hand to his heart. “You are safe, Miss Maitland.”

For some deplorable reason, she believed him. The man had a way of dredging trust from a person, even though he had put her in this dreadful situation.

In truth, she was not frightened of him. She supposed she should be frightened of him. He was far too fierce to be standing in her bedroom amid the scent of orange blossom potpourri and the perfume of roses that drifted from the gardens on the cool evening breeze. He looked far too masculine surrounded by the ivory silk and thick embroidered lace that fell in swags from her canopy and dripped from the bed. This was a soldier who belonged atop a black stallion, leading his men into war. This was a man who could lead an unsuspecting woman into dangerous choices.

Yet, there was something in his eyes as he looked around her room, a wistful look that lent a vulnerable cast to his chiseled features. Did he long for comfort and always find it out of reach? And then she realized she *was* frightened. It wasn’t the strength so obvious in this man that frightened her. It wasn’t the threat of ravishment. For she truly believed this man had never found the need to force a woman into anything. No, she had the feeling this man could charm a woman as easily as he could bring down an enemy. With one look he could make a woman understand what

it truly meant to feel feminine. With one kiss he could bend her will, mold her into any shape he desired. The power he could wield against her frightened her. Instinctively, she knew he could penetrate her defenses.

He caught her with his gaze. "Tell me something."

"What?"

He held her with his look. "Why did you invent a husband?"

"It's none of your concern."

"Couldn't you find any man willing to put up with the temper that went along with your beauty?"

Emily's back stiffened with indignation. "I had no lack of suitors."

"And yet you didn't choose one." He brushed his fingertips over the ivory silk counterpane that lay folded at the foot of her bed. "Why?"

Emily followed the slow trail of his fingers, her body growing taut deep inside. How odd. How very intimate to watch those long, elegant fingers trail across her bedclothes. "I don't intend to explain my actions to you."

"I see." He moved away from the bedpost. "Then you leave me to my own conclusions."

She stepped back as he stalked her. "Just what do you think you are about?"

He smiled. "I'm about to test a theory."

She backed away as he drew near. "Keep your distance."

He shook his head, his expression filled with the devil's own mischief. "I don't think I can test this particular theory from a distance."

Emily stepped back, hitting the low sill of the open window beside her vanity. She felt her balance shift with her backward progress. She snatched for something solid as her body continued through the dark cavity of the open window.

"Careful!" He grabbed her arms, imposing balance.

Her breath escaped in a whoosh as he hauled her against the solid wall of his chest. Without a thought she clung to him, her arms tight around his waist, her cheek pressed against the white braid slashing across the blue wool covering his chest, her body trembling in his embrace.

"Good God," he whispered, tightening his arms around her. "That was close."

Too close. She dragged air into her lungs, each quick gasp filling her senses with the intriguing aroma of bayberry, wool, leather and man.

"I haven't a fancy to become a widower before I have even had a chance to sample the bliss of married life."

She pulled back in his arms, staring up into the dark beauty of his eyes. "I shouldn't need to remind you that we are not truly married."

"No, there is no need to remind me." He smiled, that intriguing dimple slashing his right cheek.

She was painfully aware of the powerful arms that still held her, his long fingers curved at her waist. Yet, she couldn't find the strength to pull free of his light embrace. It felt right, being held by him, as though she had waited all of her life for his embrace.

"If we were truly wed, we wouldn't be standing here like this."

"We wouldn't?"

"No." He slid his hands upward along her back, slipping beneath her unbound hair, spreading warmth that soaked through the silk of her dressing gown, the chaste white cotton of her nightgown. "If we were truly wed, I would be lying beside you in that big, soft bed of yours."

"Oh." Emily stared up into his eyes, captured by the flames warming the dark depths.

"If we were truly wed." He brushed his lips against the sensitive skin beneath her left ear. "I would learn every lush curve, every elegant line." He nipped her earlobe. "Every secret hidden hollow of you."

Emily trembled beneath his touch, tingles simmering along her every nerve. *If we were truly wed*—the thought rippled across the pool of longing hidden deep within her. Her body responded to him in a way she had never imagined, even in her dreams. She felt a shifting within her, a slow melt of muscles that flowed toward him, until her breasts nestled against the solid wall of his chest, and her breath escaped on a heated sigh. His muscles tensed against her.

He lowered his head, his warm breath spilling across her cheek before his lips brushed her skin. "So beautiful," he whispered, his lips against her skin. "You are exquisite."

Emily had heard pretty compliments before. She was aware most gentlemen found her handsome. Most didn't care what lay behind her face, which was one reason their compliments didn't move her. Yet somehow the sentiments seemed far more powerful when spoken by this man. "I'm not a chit straight out of the...ah...school room. You can save your flattery."

He brushed his lips against her temple. "You are far more alluring than any chit out of the school room."

Emily felt her will unraveling. Dear heaven, she had to stop this. "You are trying to seduce me," she said, pulling back as far as his strong arms would allow.

“You have a way about you, Miss Maitland.” He smiled down at her, as though he wanted to discover everything about her. “It’s more than your obvious beauty. It’s the flicker of flame deep in your eyes, the blaze of your spirit. It makes a man want to discover the fires burning deep within you.”

“You are impertinent.” She pushed against his granite-hard chest, appalled at the quiver that stole the strength from her protest.

“Am I?”

“You certainly are.” Emily held his gaze, wondering what chance she would have if he truly decided to claim her. Yet it wasn’t his physical power she feared. No, it was a power that couldn’t be measured. “Take your hands off of me.”

He slid his hands downward, caressing the curve of her back. “If that is what you truly desire, my lady.”

Emily swallowed hard. “Of course it is.”

“As you wish.” He released her.

She stumbled back, toward the window.

“Careful.” He grabbed her arm and steered her clear of danger.

She jerked free of his grasp. “I can manage quite nicely without your help, thank you.”

He shrugged. “I’m simply trying to make certain your family isn’t plunged into mourning.”

“They would be if they realized what a terrible mistake I have made.”

“In your choice of husbands?”

“Precisely.”

“What would they think if they knew we were not actually married?”

Emily shivered when she thought of what would happen if anyone knew she was in her bedchamber alone with a man who was not her husband.

“Precisely,” he said, as though he had read her mind.

She stared at him, amazed and appalled at how easily he could read her. Over the years she had cultivated a certain poise, a means of freezing a gentleman with a glance. Still, when he was near she felt as clumsy as she had her first time in a London ballroom. No matter how many years she had spent in London, how sophisticated her mask, in many ways she still felt as unsure of herself as she had that first time she had set foot in London.

He lifted the book of poems from the vanity and examined it. He flipped through the pages as though he hadn’t a care in the world, as though he hadn’t just come close to seducing her out of every scruple she owned.

She snatched the book from his hand. “I would ask you not touch my things.”

“You are very tense.”

“It’s odd, but I find it difficult to relax around a blackmailer. It’s a terrible flaw I suppose.”

“I’m not about to reveal your secret.”

“It would ruin your own budding career as a fortune hunter, I believe.” She hugged the book to her chest, staring at him, appalled at how easily he could manipulate her emotions—all of them—some she hadn’t even realized she possessed. “My father would see you thrown into prison should he ever discover the truth.”

“It seems we both have much to lose if our secret is discovered.”

“It might be worth a scandal just to watch you rot in irons.”

He laughed, a deeply masculine sound that made her smile despite her anger. “You really are a bloodthirsty little chit.”

She quickly pulled her lips into a stern line. “Keep that in mind the next time you try to seduce me.”

“Tell me something, Miss Maitland.”

“What?”

“Would you be more offended if I tried to seduce you?” He smiled, a lazy curve of finely molded lips that sparked memories of his kiss. “Or, if I did not?”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” She turned away from him, hiding the blush prickling her cheeks.

She stared out at the gardens and lawns that rolled away from the back of her father’s house. Grass sprinkled with moonlight stretched to the edge of a deep gorge where the river flowed like a shimmering silver necklace. A night like this was straight out of a legend, an evening for a gallant knight to rescue a fair lady from her lonely tower. Except her knight had turned out to be a dragon in disguise. “I can assure you, I certainly don’t enjoy being mauled by a man such as you.”

“Is that a fact?”

“It is. Without a doubt. Your actions are quite bothersome.”

Although he moved as silently as a shadow, the heat of his body brushed against her back as he drew near. She resisted the urge to run, determined to show this man she was made of stronger stuff.

“That is going to make our time together rather difficult.”

“An ordeal.”

“Tell me something, my lady,” he whispered, his lips brushing her ear.

Emily closed her eyes, the velvet whisper rippling in a warm breath across her skin. “What?”

“Do you want the right or left side of the bed?”