



# SAINTS'S TEMPTATION

DEBRA DIER

## Prologue

England, 1809

“Stand back, or I shall be forced to murder you.” Marisa Grantham kept her voice low hoping to handle the situation without summoning anyone to the private parlor in the Red Lion Inn.

She had returned to the parlor to retrieve the novel she had left behind after dinner, finding sleep impossible until she knew the ending of *The Lady of Ravenwood Castle*. She really had to discover if Lord Ravenwood had actually murdered his wife or if he was indeed the love of Olivia’s life. Although she was quite certain the quiet Mr. Haverleigh would be the hero of the piece. Unfortunately the young man who had followed her into the parlor had anything but heroic thoughts in mind.

“Come now, my lovely. No need to play games. I have plenty of blunt.” The young man lunged for her. She poked his chest. He staggered back a step then stood glaring at her. “Here now, that hurt.”

“I shall be forced to do more than hurt you if you don’t let me pass.” She really hoped she needn’t crack the young man over the head. Although he was dressed as a gentleman, the thick smell of spirits clung to him. Liquor had a way of dissolving the thin veneer of civilization. “I’m not a light skirt. You have made an error in judgment.”

“No need to play coy.” He swept his hand over his thick golden curls and tugged at the bottom of his yellow waistcoat, as though he needed to make himself presentable for her. “By gad you are a handsome piece. A face of an angel and a body for sin. Name your price.”

“Oh you odious blackguard. Stand aside and allow me to pass.”

“It’s obvious the lady does not want your attentions, Ferndown.”

At the sound of a deep male voice, Marisa glanced toward the door as a tall man entered the room. He closed the door softly behind him. Light from the wall sconces flickered in the small room, casting a golden light on the newcomer. His speech would have proclaimed him a gentleman even if he hadn’t been dressed in an elegant close fitting dark grey coat and buff colored breeches. He obviously knew the drunken lout who had attacked her. Had he come to assist her, or join the blackguard intent on ravishing her? Marisa gripped the poker, prepared to do battle, while she fought her rising panic.

“Bloody hell. Didn’t expect to see you here.” Ferndown stared at the other man, squinting as though trying to discern his features. “Which one are you? Devil or Saint?”

The tall young man crossed the room, declining to answer the inquiry. “I suggest you leave, Ferndown. You have obviously made a mistake. The lady is a gentlewoman.”

“I see the way of it. You want her for yourself.” Ferndown lifted his fists. “I don’t bloody well care which one you are. I can knock you down, Devil or Saint.”

The new comer dodged a fist aimed for his nose. “Ferndown you—”

“Stand still, blast you.” Ferndown jabbed with his right fist.

The young man blocked the blow with his left arm. The impact knocked a book from his grasp. Before it hit the floor, he rammed his right fist into Ferndown’s jaw. Ferndown’s head snapped back, his eyes widened, and then he slowly sank to the floor at the young man’s feet with a groan.

The young man studied his handiwork with a critical eye. “Ferndown always did have trouble holding his liquor.”

“If you have any thoughts of picking up where he left off, I would suggest disposing of them.”

He turned to face her, obviously stunned by the accusation in her voice.

Light from the lamps behind her fell full upon his face. Thick black hair fell in disheveled waves around a face carved with strong lines and curves. It was a face that might have graced the pages of a romantic novel, a face designed to add a beat to a girl’s heart, a face any respectable heroine would dream of at night.

In a distant region of her brain she realized she was staring at him. Yet she couldn’t help herself. Not only was he tall, but he was splendidly proportioned—wide through the shoulders and narrow through the waist and hips. Buff colored breeches molded every strong line of his long legs before sliding into shiny black boots. No doubt her stare would earn her one more notation in the long list of things she must learn to control in her quest to become the proper young lady her family expected her to be. The list was quickly reaching epic proportions. Still, no one was here to correct her, and he was so very appealing to her gaze.

Under her close scrutiny color deepened in his cheeks. A subtle understanding filled those beautiful grey-green eyes, as though he knew precisely how very intriguing she found him. Instead of the arrogance she had so often seen in men who possessed such potent physical beauty, his expression revealed an entirely different emotion—he looked as though he wanted nothing more than to turn and run from the room.

“I take it you are not with this drunkard.”

“Although I’m acquainted with Ferndown, I’m not a member of his party.” He moistened his lips. “If the poker has grown heavy, it’s safe to put it down. I assure you, I have never acquired the practice of accosting young ladies.”

She slipped the poker into a stand by the hearth, iron clanking against iron. In the three years she had spent traveling abroad with her parents, she had developed a fairly good grasp of the various sub-species of the human male. Although this young man had all the physical attributes one would associate with a rake, she suspected any gentleman near the age of twenty who still retained the ability to blush must be placed in a far different category.

“Ferndown landed on your book.”

He glanced at the man sprawled at his feet. “It doesn’t look as though he has taken notice of it.”

“I doubt he shall be taking notice of much for a while. You have quite a prodigious right. Thank you for saving me from the gallows.”

“Gallows?”

“I was afraid I would have to hit him over the head. In which case, I very likely would have murdered him. Still, the gallows was a much preferred alternative to what he had in mind.” She plucked at the ragged blue muslin at her shoulder, suppressing a shudder.

“Are you all right?”

“Yes. I’m fine.”

He took the stickpin from the folds of his neck cloth. “Perhaps this will help repair the damage.”

An emerald winked in the candlelight as he handed her the pin. She fussed with the muslin a moment, and then slipped the pin into the fabric, hitching the ragged edges together. “What do you think?”

“It should suffice until you return to your room.” He glanced around the room. “You came down without a chaperon?”

“A woman should not need a chaperon strapped to her side to keep from being set upon by drunkards.”

His eyebrows slid upward at the sharp tone of her voice. “Of course.”

“I suppose I should have thought to bring someone with me, but it seemed simple enough. Instead of awakening my maid, or disturbing my parents, I came down to fetch the book I left behind after dinner.” She glanced down at the drunkard, who lay snoring near her feet. “I should have brought my pistol. I didn’t realize England was so uncivilized.”

“I didn’t realize young ladies had taken to carrying pistols.”

“I’m afraid I have a great deal to learn about being a proper English lady. We have been traveling out of the country for the past three years. Unfortunately, Mama wonders if she will ever be able to pound all the intricacies of proper English behavior into my head before we go to London. I have to admit, I’m a bit apprehensive about it myself.”

“I cannot imagine you having a difficult time in London.”

“You are being kind, but facts betray the truth. A proper lady wouldn’t have gone roaming about a public inn alone.”

“If we lived in an ideal world, you should have no concern about retrieving your book without a chaperon.”

“Another kind way of saying I was a proper hen-wit. Mama is hoping I shall learn how to swim before I take the plunge into the great pool of the *ton*. She insists we partake of Society in London this September when there will be far fewer people for me to offend in Town. She hopes to give me a chance to polish my manners before everyone arrives this coming spring. I’m eighteen and she is afraid I shall end a spinster if she doesn’t get me to London.” She glanced away from him, feeling heat rise in her cheeks. She was babbling, which was certainly on the list of things she must change. “And here I’m rattling away. Another of my many faults, I’m afraid.”

“Perhaps it’s the light, but I cannot perceive any faults.”

He spoke softly, without a hint of flirtation, and somehow that made the words all the more compelling. “You are indeed very kind.”

He held her gaze a moment, as though he was searching for something to say. Instead of a cultivated gallantry, he retrieved a brown leather book from the floor near the hearth, the book that had plunged her into this situation. He turned it over to read the title. “*The Lady of Ravenwood Castle.*”

“My secret is revealed. I’m addicted to dreadfully romantic novels.”

He smiled as he handed her the book. “Your secret is safe with me.”

She held the book close against her chest, knowing she should leave. It wasn’t at all proper to remain alone in his company. Yet she wanted to linger, if just a few moments longer. “And what book is Ferndown using as a pillow?”

“A history of the reign of James the Second.” He shifted on his feet, looking uncomfortable. “And now you know my secret. I enjoy stuffy tomes on history.”

“I also enjoy reading history.”

He looked surprised. “You do?”

“It provides a glimpse of another time and place. I recently read a book detailing all the reasons for the unrest in America.”

“By Thomas Harding?”

“Yes. Did you also read it?”

“I found it intriguing, particularly the bits about the spies in the King’s court.”

She studied him a moment, realizing he was one of the few men she had ever met who actually thought her interest in history and politics not at all strange for a lady. In fact he looked pleased. “Why did he ask if you were Devil or Saint?”

“I’m afraid our friends at Oxford contrived to saddle my brother and me with those peculiar epithets. Since we are twins and bear an uncanny likeness to one another, I suppose they felt it necessary to label us in some fashion.”

“I suspect you are not Devil?”

“No. I’m not.” He glanced down at the floor. “Since I would prefer not to propagate unduly high expectations, I shall introduce myself. Clayton Trevelyan, Earl Huntingdon.”

“Lady Marisa Grantham.” She offered her hand.

He took her bare hand and inclined his head in a bow, holding her no longer than propriety demanded. She had left her gloves along with her good sense in her chamber. His bare skin felt warm and firm against her hand, and just a bit rough. A delicate shimmer of heat whispered over her skin.

“It’s a pleasure,” he said softly.

“I suspect we would have met tomorrow under different circumstances. My father and your father are old friends. In fact we are headed for Chatswyck. Your father has invited us to stay for the summer. Father mentioned you and your brother might be visiting as well. Perhaps you have met my father, Edgar Grantham, Marquess Westbury. He and your father have often spent time at Father’s hunting lodge in Yorkshire. Perhaps you have had occasion to join them.”

“My brother and I spent a great deal of time away at school,” he said, his words barely rising above a soft rap on the door. “We seldom had the opportunity to—”

His words ended in a gasp as she threw her arm around his waist and spun him around until his back was to the door. “Lady Marisa?”

“Hide me,” she whispered. Behind him she heard the door open, the sound followed by a soft feminine gasp. He stared at Marisa, as though she had just offered him a rather suspicious looking apple. “Hide you?”

“No one must see us like this,” Marisa whispered.

He flinched as though her meaning had suddenly pierced his befuddled brain. He glanced over his shoulder. Marisa peeked past his arm and saw a young serving maid standing just inside the room clutching a tray laden with someone’s supper.

He swallowed hard before he spoke. “I have changed my mind. You can take the tray back to the kitchen.”

“Beggin’ yer pardon, milord.” The maid lowered her gaze to the man who lay snoring on the floor.

“My friend had too much to drink. We don’t require anything else. You may go now.”

The maid looked at him, sly understanding filling her expression. “Yes, milord,” she said, backing through the doorway. “I’ll make sure ye aren’t bothered.”

After the door closed, Marisa released her hold on him and stepped back. “Lud—I mean, *my goodness*, that was close. I certainly wouldn’t want to compromise you.”

Huntingdon looked bewildered. “Compromise me?”

“Alone with a lady who is dreadfully disheveled. Before either one of us knew what was happening, we would find ourselves engaged to be married to prevent a possible scandal.”

“I hadn’t thought of that possibility.”

“I had better go back to my chamber before anyone else decides to come in.”

“I should escort you back to your door to make certain you have no more misadventures this evening.”

“I don’t wish to put you to any trouble.” She backed away from him. “Thank you again, I really—”

Her words ended in a gasp as her foot collided with Ferndown. The book slipped from her hand. It plopped on Ferndown’s head, eliciting a low grumble from that quarter. She wobbled and tipped backward as her balance deserted her. Huntingdon grabbed her arms, catching her before she fell. She pitched forward, colliding with his chest.

She pressed her hands against his chest and looked up at him, instantly aware of the hard thrust of muscles against her palms, the warmth of him sliding around her. Suddenly it took a great deal of effort to form a sentence. “And now you will think me clumsy as well as brazen and hen-witted.”

“Not at all.”

In a distant part of her brain she knew she should step away from him. It was certainly the proper thing to do. Yet the intriguing aroma of citrus and herbs warmed by his skin curled around her, enticing her in the most unsettling fashion. She sensed a great deal of warmth simmered just beneath the surface of this shy young man, like flames glowing beneath ice, and that warmth beckoned her in ways she didn’t fully understand.

She felt drawn to him, like shards of iron drawn to a lodestone. A curious expression filled his eyes, as though he felt the same magnetic current she did, the invisible tether drawing one to the other. Thick black lashes swept down as he looked at her lips, his lips parting slightly. He wanted to kiss her. She knew it, felt it on a level that

dipped below the polite surface of refinement into a pool of something far more primitive. The answering need within her shocked her. What might it be like to feel the soft brush of his lips against hers?

She was quite certain kissing young men she had only recently met was most definitely on the list of things she really should not do. If she didn't break this web weaving around them, she would do something foolish and far too reckless. "I'm steady now."

He flinched, as though he suddenly realized his improper behavior. He dropped his hands and stepped back from her. "I beg your pardon."

"There is no need, I assure you." She retrieved her book and stepped around Ferndown, far too aware of every place her clothes brushed her skin. "Thank you again for coming to my rescue."

"I shall see you safely to your room. At a discreet distance, of course."

She stepped back toward the door. "You really don't need to trouble yourself."

"I would feel better knowing you were safe."

"If you truly don't mind, I would appreciate your company. I suppose you must stay at a discreet distance."

"I think I must keep my distance."

"You are right, of course." After she made certain no one was in the hall, she slipped from the room.

Huntingdon followed her down the hall, up the stairs and down another hall, staying far enough back to avoid any suggestion of impropriety, yet close enough to come to her aid should she need it. She turned at the door to her chamber and lifted her hand. The light of a wall sconce near her door illuminated his shy smile before she slipped into the safety of her chamber.

"Lud!" Marisa leaned back against the door and cringed. She had made a complete fool of herself—running about like a hoyden—babbling like a fool. Still, Lord Huntingdon hadn't appeared the least bit judgmental.

She hugged her book to her chest, astonished at her reaction to the man. She had never so much as allowed a gentleman the liberty of holding her hand. Tonight she had fought the insane desire to throw her arms around his neck and kiss him. What the devil had gotten into her? What was this odd, agitated feeling inside of her? Why did she suddenly feel overly warm?

She twirled around the room and fell upon her bed. Light from the fire flickered on the ceiling, shadows entwining in a sultry dance. Suddenly it seemed morning couldn't come quickly enough. Tomorrow she would see Huntingdon again. Oh yes, tomorrow couldn't come quickly enough.

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"I should have known it." George William Justin Trevelyan, Duke of Marlow, paced the length of his study at Chatswyck. He halted in front of one of the long mullioned windows overlooking the east gardens, morning sunlight streaming into the room, illuminating his fierce expression. "Apparently your brother has chosen not to join us at Chatswyck this summer."

Clayton sat on an upholstered armchair near the white marble fireplace. "He may still come, sir."

Marlow glanced at his son. "After he allows me to stew a while?"

"I'm certain Justin means no disrespect."

"Are you? I'm quite certain that is precisely his intent." Marlow rested his clenched fist against the window frame and stared into the gardens. "He still blames me for Wormsley."

Clayton knew the problem went deeper than the monster his father had hired as their tutor when they were boys. Although he understood the reasons their father had altered so dramatically after their mother's death, Justin wasn't as forgiving. His brother saw only their father's desertion at a time when they both needed him.

"I admit Wormsley was an error in judgment. What happened to you and Justin was regrettable." Marlow paced to his desk. "But I dealt with the problem."

Clayton still bore the scars on his back from the beatings. Yet the worst scars were those that didn't show. Although he had tried, he hadn't been able to save his brother from the brutality of their sadistic tutor. In the end Wormsley had died by his own hand, from a pistol given to him by the Duke.

"I know it's difficult." Marlow lifted a brass unicorn from the desk and ran his fingertip over the sculpted horn. "But Justin must learn to control his emotions."

*Emotions must be controlled or they shall control us.* The words his father had spoken long ago rang in Clayton's memory. Time and time again the Duke had repeated the lecture, as though he could erase all the emotion in his sons. Over the years Clayton had learned to keep his emotions under close rein. Justin had not.

"Justin has spirit, I will say that." Marlow set the unicorn on the desk. Tall and fair, Clayton and his twin bore little resemblance to their sire. They resembled their mother, which had only served as a reminder of their father's loss. "He could topple empires if he put his mind to it. Bold. Daring. With a will of iron. Justin is the type of man who could make a father proud."

Unlike a quiet scholar, Clayton thought. Still, he didn't need his father's words to confirm a truth he already knew. Years ago he had come to realize he couldn't win his father's approval, no matter how hard he tried. Unfortunately he had never learned to stop trying.

"And I would be proud of him, if Justin were not so blasted intent on making me angry all of the time."

“It might help to talk with him, sir.”

“I have lectured him. I have cut off his funds. And still he defies me.”

A strong sense of protectiveness welled in Clayton. “Justin has done well on his own, sir.”

“Unfortunately he has.” Marlow studied Clayton a long while, as though he were searching for something more than what he saw in the young man sitting before him. His disappointment in his younger son wasn’t something the Duke concealed with any success. “If Justin refuses to produce a legitimate heir, I’m afraid the responsibility will fall to you.”

Clayton’s chest tightened when he thought of having his life planned for him. Yet he had been saddled with a powerful sense of responsibility, one he had never been able to shake. “Yes sir.”

“Westbury’s youngest daughter might be the answer, it’s the main reason I invited them here for the summer. Excellent man, Westbury. Tall, handsome, intelligent. Title goes back to Charles I. His wife Audrey is one of Viscount Aston’s daughters. She is still an exceptionally handsome female. Marisa comes from excellent stock.”

Clayton couldn’t imagine ever fixing Lady Marisa’s interest. He would be doomed to disappoint his father should he try. “From what I could gather last night, Lady Marisa is one of those females with definite ideas of affection and romance in connection with marriage. She is passionate about Gothic romances.”

Marlow’s nostrils flared. “Affection is highly overrated.”

*Affection is for the weak, remember that.* His father had first spoken those words on a cold December night twelve years before, when two devastated nine-year old boys had come to their father for reassurance. Their mother had died that night. Yet Clayton hadn’t realized until later that the warm and affectionate Father he had known had also died that night, struck down by the passionate affection for the woman he had married and lost.

“I don’t need to warn you about the danger of caring too much.” Marlow’s voice grew low and bitter as he spoke. “You have seen what affection can do to a man.”

Clayton stared at the chair across from him. Twelve years ago a different chair had stood in that same spot. Although he tried to push down those memories, they taunted him. After Justin had gone to bed, Clayton had come into this room the night their mother had died, hoping to comfort his father. That night still haunted him. In his mind, Clayton could see it—silver glinting in the light from the hearth—a pistol in his father’s hand.

*I don’t want to live without her, Clayton. I can’t live without her. Nothing else matters. Nothing.*

Not even his sons. Somehow Clayton had broken through the thick wall of despair that had surrounded his father that night. Somehow he had managed to drag his father back from the brink. Yet it had come at a cost—the remaining shreds of his innocence.

“I suspect a young lady addicted to Gothic romances expects a great deal from marriage,” Clayton said.

“I’m not surprised the girl has such foolish notions, considering the way her parents are with one another.”

“Under the circumstances, I doubt Lady Marisa would be interested in me in any romantic sense.”

Marlow’s expression revealed his surprise. “You and Marisa?”

“I thought that was what you were implying, sir.”

Marlow laughed, the sound grating along Clayton’s spine. “You and that spirited young woman! Good gad, Clayton, I cannot imagine Marisa would find you the least bit interesting.”

Heat prickled Clayton’s neck. Although he knew his own inadequacies, it was still uncomfortable having them lifted to the light by one’s parent. “No, sir. She would not.”

“Justin on the other hand, now there is a man who could *inspire* a Gothic romance. No matter how dangerous it might be, nothing but unbridled passion will suit him. And from what I have seen of Marisa, she might be able to reform your brother. As you may have noticed when you met her last night, the child is a diamond of the first water.”

An image blossomed in his mind, of glossy raven tresses, radiant blue eyes, and an enticing dimple at one corner of lush lips. She had invaded his dreams last night. He had left the inn early to avoid her, and the insidious attraction she held. He had never met anyone who captured his interest the way she had. “Yes sir. She is exquisitely beautiful.”

“From what I was able to gather from my fortnight at Westbury last month, she is also impetuous and willful, completely unpredictable. She is intelligent, blatantly so, not afraid to show it. She is in fact everything Justin would find intriguing.” Marlow rocked back on his heels. “I have hopes in that quarter, Clayton. If I can ever get Justin to meet her, I might actually see my blasted heir married.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Obviously Marisa is not the girl for you.”

“Obviously not.” Still, even as Clayton spoke the words, a strange proprietary instinct sank into him, like the sharp talons of a hawk. Proprietary notions about that passionate, headstrong, heartbreakingly beautiful young woman? Apparently he had lost his mind.

Clayton knew precisely what he was. He didn’t possess the dash of his brother. He lived his adventures through the pages of books. He was more comfortable in a library than in a ballroom. Women such as Marisa didn’t lose their hearts to quiet bookworms. Yet it would be far too easy to lose his heart to her. She was the type of woman who could steal a man’s soul with nothing more than a smile.

“I expect you to entertain Marisa while she is here, at least until your brother manages to make his appearance. Once Justin is here, there will be no need for you to stay.”

Clayton stared up into his father’s smiling face while inside he weighed the danger of the alluring Lady Marisa against his responsibility to his sire. Without much encouragement he could fall under her spell, lose his head, make a complete fool of himself. Once under her sway, he suspected there would be no hope to ever escape. He had to get away from here. Now. Before she arrived. “I hadn’t planned to stay, sir.”

“Nonsense. I require you to stay until Justin arrives.” Marlow patted Clayton’s shoulder. “I know I can depend on you to help me with this situation.”

The scales tipped. Responsibility once again ruled the day. Clayton swallowed hard, pushing back the tight knot in his throat. “I shall do my best, sir.”

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Marisa sipped her tea and tried not to stare at the young man sitting nearby in the elegant green drawing room of Chatswyck. It seemed she had been holding her breath until the moment Huntingdon had walked into the room. Unfortunately he looked as though he wished he was anywhere except in her company.

Although he had been charming last night, he had contributed little to the conversation this afternoon. Instead, he sat quietly beside his grandmother, Sophia the Dowager Duchess, stiff and uneasy as though he were waiting to be called before his maker on Judgment Day.

Sophia touched Clayton’s arm. “Why don’t you take Marisa for a stroll in the gardens, while we elders catch up on what we have been doing the past three years.”

Clayton looked at Marisa, his beautiful grey-green eyes betraying his utter dread at the proposition. Obviously she had earned his disfavor last night. Unfortunately he had earned her interest. He had invaded her dreams, dominated her every thought since the moment she had met him.

A warm June breeze soft with the scents of cedar mulch and flowers wrapped around them as they crossed the terrace and entered one of the vast gardens stretching out from the back of the house. The sun played hide and seek with the earth, ducking behind thick white clouds, peeking out, casting golden rays upon the vast expanse of bushes and flowers.

Marisa studied Huntingdon’s stiff profile, her anxiety and irritation growing. A lady should not draw attention to a gentleman’s lack of interest in her. Yet she couldn’t help herself—obviously just another of her many flaws. “I realize you think me a brazen hen-wit, but must you look as though you are headed for the tooth drawer?”

He glanced at her, his eyes wide with surprise. “The tooth-drawer?”

“You are frowning as though walking with me is the most disagreeable task you could be assigned, just below mucking out the stables.”

He considered this a moment before he spoke, his voice deep and soft. “You are certainly in the habit of speaking your mind.”

Marisa paused beside a large stone fountain where water spewed from a pair of playful sea horses. Twin plumes shot upward, reaching for the sky, only to tumble in silvery streams into a wide stone basin. “Speaking my mind is only one of my many flaws.”

“One of many?”

“One might add wandering about inns unattended, revealing my interest in Gothic romances, using ‘lud’ instead of ‘my goodness,’ and...in truth there are really too many to mention. By the way, here is your stick pin.” She pulled the emerald pin from the bodice of her gown. “Thank you once again for helping me last night.”

Instead of using the excuse to touch her hand, as many gentlemen of her acquaintance might, Clayton held out his hand palm up. She dropped the emerald stick pin into his palm and tried to quash the irritation building inside of her. A lady couldn’t fault a gentleman for behaving in a gentlemanly fashion. Still, she bristled all the same.

Simply being near him made her edgy and restless, as though her skin were growing too small for her body. And he didn’t even like her.

Clayton smiled, a wide boyish grin that warmed the cool depths of his eyes and transformed a handsome face into something far more devastating. His smile hit her squarely in the chest, stealing the air from her lungs.

“My brother is fond of saying that anyone without a bad habit must be a dead bore.”

With an effort, she recovered enough breath to speak. “Then I suppose your brother would approve of me.”

“My brother generally approves of every handsome woman he meets. I’m certain he would find you beguiling, as any man would who has ever met you. As I do.”

The words were not spoken as a pleasant gallantry. Instead, he spoke with an honesty that knocked her off her axis. With a sense of relief she realized his earlier reticence stemmed from his shy nature and not a dislike of her.

A warm breeze stirred the leaves of an elm standing alongside the path. The rustling sound mingled with the splash of water, colliding with the pounding of her own pulse in her ears. “How about you, Lord Huntingdon? Have you any bad habits?”

He twisted the stick pin between his fingers, staring at the emerald as though viewing secrets hidden there. “I suppose I have my nose in a book far more often than I should.”

“Can you not think of anything more dreadful? Here I have admitted to being a brazen hen-wit with little regard for proper behavior, and your only sin is that you like to read.” She drew her hand through the sparkling stream of cool water spilling from a sea horse and flicked her wet fingers at him, flinging drops of water into his handsome face. He parted his lips in surprise. “You are being shamefully ungentlemanly.”

A drop of water slid down his cheek and touched one corner of his full lips. “You have uncovered another of my many faults. I’m not adept at entertaining young ladies with sparkling conversation. And I’m a failure at flirtation. Not to say you are flirting with me. I certainly wouldn’t imply anything of the kind. No doubt you would think me foolish for even suggesting you might be flirting with me.”

“I don’t think you are foolish at all.” She stared at him a moment, stunned by her own behavior. “I am flirting with you, Lord Huntingdon.”

He looked surprised. “And I’m making a muddle of it.”

“That is a matter of opinion.”

Curiosity glimmered in the depths of his stunning eyes. “I don’t believe I have ever met anyone like you before, Lady Marisa.”

“I can say the same of you.” Her heart pounded against the wall of her chest, making her feel breathless. “I suspect your father has insisted you entertain me. I hope you don’t mind.”

“What man could not wish to be in your company? Your astonishing beauty would be enough to delight any gentleman. Your candor and wit are joyfully refreshing.” He glanced away from her, fixing his gaze on the fountain. “Yet I fear in time you will grow weary of a gentleman who is not adept at witty gallantries.”

Apparently he had no idea how devastating his own candor could be. She had been paid pretty compliments by men before. Yet never before had a gentleman been able to set her pulse racing with little more than a shy statement of his feelings. “Does this mean you won’t be composing odes to the lobes of my ears?”

He looked at her, his expression shifting from surprise to amusement. “They are quite lovely ears. I can see that they would inspire a poet. If I were more inclined to verse I would compare them to...lily petals.”

“Lily petals? How nice. Although it might be difficult to find a rhyme.”

“You see I’m hopeless.”

“I suspect you aren’t as hopeless as you profess.”

“I shall do my best to be an entertaining host.”

“You make it sound a daunting prospect, as troubling as studying for a first in mathematics at Oxford.”

“I have always found mathematics less daunting than conversing with young ladies.”

“Since you have been doing quite well conversing with me, I think you must reevaluate your rather odd opinion of your abilities. And perhaps you would do me a favor as well.”

“A favor?”

“Since Mama is certain I need a great deal of polishing before I show my face in London, and I know she is justified in her opinion, do you suppose you could correct me if I misstep? Point out any slips in proper decorum? I would dislike making a complete cake of myself in London.”

“I shall try my best to be of some value.”

“I confess I find the idea of entering London Society both exciting and terrifying. I’m afraid I shall disappoint everyone.”

“The only people you shall disappoint are all the gentlemen who are not able to dance with you. The *ton* will call you a diamond of the first water, an original, so beautiful you shall cause accidents when you walk down the street, from gentlemen watching you instead of the road.”

“I shall be a menace, is that it?”

He nodded, a glint of humor lighting his eyes. “You shall prove a menace to every gentleman who wishes to guard his heart.”

“Perhaps I should be kept under lock and key.”

“There would be rioting in the streets if you were kept under lock and key.” He smiled, the perfect cupid’s bow of his lips stretching in a shy manner. “No Lady Marisa. You must be allowed to breathe life into the stuffy confines of London Society.”

She traced the curve of his smile with her gaze, a soft warmth radiating deep within her. A funny feeling swept over her, an odd sensation that she was precisely where she ought to be—in his company. She only wished she could step closer to him and feel his arms around her. At that moment there was nothing else she wanted more than to rest her cheek against his chest and stand in his embrace. She couldn’t of course. It would be quite scandalous if she wrapped her arms around him—at least not until they knew each other better. A summer at Chatswyck suddenly seemed a great deal more enjoyable than she had ever imagined possible.



# Chapter One

*London, 1816*

“I shall see if His Lordship is receiving callers this afternoon, Lady Marisa.” The butler lifted one bushy eyebrow, his quiet indictment on the impropriety of the situation.

“Please tell Lord Huntingdon it’s a matter of grave importance.” Marisa forced her lips into a smile, hoping to conceal the tension coiling inside of her. Did Greensley have any idea of what had transpired in this room so many years ago? If it were not a matter of life or death a team of horses hitched to her waist couldn’t have dragged her back into this house. “I trust I can depend upon you, Greensley.”

One corner of his lips lifted ever so slightly. “I shall do my best, Lady Marisa.”

Marisa stood in the middle of Clayton Trevelyan’s library in Grosvenor Square and tried to draw a deep breath into her tight lungs. The faint scent of leather and old parchment filled her senses. It should have been a comforting aroma, but nothing could ease her tension.

It had been a very long time since she had stepped foot in this room—seven years, six months and two weeks. Nothing about it had changed. Books lined every inch of every mahogany book shelf. Unlike most gentlemen she knew, Clayton Trevelyan actually read the books in his library and didn’t merely choose the volumes to decorate the room.

It was an intensely masculine retreat all in shades of brown, cinnamon, and gold, with thickly carved furniture. A pair of brown leather wing back chairs stood near the gold marble fireplace, creating a cozy place to sit by the fire. She tried not to look at the hearth, but her gaze was drawn there, the way an onlooker might stare at the scene of a horrible accident.

The last time she had been here, a wood fire had crackled on the hearth, and a foolish young woman had learned just how little she meant to the man she adored. Heat crept upward along her neck, infiltrating her cheeks, until her skin burned with the memory of her self-inflicted humiliation.

She walked to the windows overlooking the street, and pressed her hands to her burning cheeks. Good gracious, she was five and twenty, far too old to allow a blush to betray her. Yet the memory of her behavior that night and the incident that had followed didn’t allow her any relief from the shame of her actions. She only hoped the blush would fade by the time Clayton entered the room. *If* Clayton entered the room. He could very well send her packing, turn her away like a beggar at his door. No doubt his devotion to propriety wouldn’t approve of an unmarried female paying a call upon a bachelor.

She stared down at her coach, which stood waiting in front of the house behind a team of matched greys. Perhaps she should have followed her Aunt Cecilia’s advice. She might very well be making far too much out of nothing. It was far safer to keep her distance from Clayton Trevelyan. Her decision to come here put both her dignity and her heart at risk. Again.

She moistened her lips and forced starch into her backbone. She was no longer a foolish young girl, she assured herself. She wouldn’t make the same mistakes she had made with Clayton Trevelyan. The man would never get close to her again. She had good cause to come here today. Once she relayed her message, her business with him was done.

“I wasn’t expecting visitors this afternoon.”

Marisa flinched at the sound of that deep voice. Clayton had entered the room without a sound, taking her by surprise. She hesitated a moment before turning to face him, drawing her defenses around her like a cloak.

Clayton stood near the threshold of the room, looking at her as he might a wild animal he had come across in the woods, a creature he suspected might bite. Excitement flared through her, like flame through dried kindling. It had been a lifetime since she had been this close to him. She had hoped the attraction he held for her might only linger in her memory. Yet one look killed that hope.

“I’m sorry to descend upon you unexpectedly.” Her voice didn’t betray her turmoil, she assured herself. It was only a bit breathless, nothing to catch his attention.

“I’m sorry to keep you waiting.” He moved toward her in long strides filled with the easy grace born of power. “It was unavoidable, I’m afraid.”

“Greensley said you were being fitted for a new coat.”

“It took a few minutes to change.”

Marisa offered him her hand as he drew near, the gesture nothing more than polite. Even though she wore gloves, she felt it just the same, a spark of contact, as sharp and shimmering as a flash from flint. A part of her—that wounded girl who had never recovered from the disaster known as Clayton Trevelyan—had hoped the years would alter him, rob him of the devastating male beauty that could add a beat to her heart with nothing more than a glance from his stunning eyes. Yet he was even more handsome than her memories of him.

He held her with gentle strength, long elegantly tapered fingers embracing her hand with polite pressure. A clean scent of citrus and herbs warmed by his skin drifted across the distance between them, coaxing her to draw

closer to him. She resisted his allure this time. She was grateful for the glove. It disguised the dampness of her palm.

Although she could conjure his face in her mind at will, she realized looking up at him the differences in the man he was now and the boy who had stolen her heart. Grey and green blended in his eyes, the color of spring leaves viewed through a silvery mist. Those beautiful eyes regarded her with a cool detachment that was somehow worse than anything she could have imagined. There was none of their history in that look. None of the secrets they had shared in their youth. It was as if he had wiped her from his past, as though she were nothing more than an acquaintance he had known long ago.

He studied her face a moment, as though he too were comparing his memories to the reality standing before him. “You are looking well.”

“I can say the same of you.”

She hadn’t caught more than a few glimpses of him since she had arrived in London for the Season. Being this close to him again, she caught herself looking for the boy she had known in this man. His thick black hair had always fallen in disheveled waves over his brow, inviting her to smooth the wayward tresses. Today they were brushed neatly back from his brow, tamed and disciplined. A master had carved his face, wielding a chisel with bold strokes, molding sharply defined cheekbones, a fine straight nose, and a strong jaw that hinted at a stubborn streak. He had always seemed a little distracted, shy, unsure of himself. Now he looked as though he could command a legion with the snap of his fingers.

“You are completely recovered from your wound?”

“Yes.” He released her hand. “I’m completely recovered. Thank you.”

“I read about you in the *Times* after the battle. They called you one of the heroes of Waterloo.”

“I did no more than many others.”

Marisa knew better. Since he had purchased his commission seven years ago, she had gleaned every detail about him from every source she could safely employ—papers, his grandmother Sophia, the Dowager Duchess of Marlow, his friends, including the husband of one of her closest friends. Simon St. James, Marquess Blackthorne, had served with Clayton in the Army. They had shared missions in Paris as agents in their service for the Crown. They had fought beside each other on the battlefield.

Countless tales of Clayton’s reckless bravery had reached her through the years and with each one she had felt a chill. Every day she had expected to hear of his death. Every year since he had left, she had suffered in silence, her life suspended until the day he had marched home, safe from war. Still, even though the distance of miles had faded, the distance between them could never be breached.

She looked up at him, her smile faltering as polite conversation dwindled. Silence stretched between them, in a space where only memories dared tread. “I suppose you are wondering why I have come here this afternoon.”

“I will admit, I’m curious.” Clayton glanced around the room and frowned as he looked back at her. “You didn’t actually come here unattended?”

“Of course not. I came with my Aunt Cecilia.”

“Apparently your aunt has added invisibility to her list of accomplishments.” Clayton glanced up at the brass balustrade encircling the second-floor gallery. “Or perhaps she is hiding in the gallery.”

His sarcasm plucked at nerves already stretched taut. It took all of her control to keep her voice composed. “She is waiting in the carriage. I’m afraid Aunt Cecilia didn’t approve of my visit. But I felt it important to speak with you.”

“A chaperon who refuses to accompany you, yet you still pay the call on a bachelor. Alone. Quite an interesting choice you have made.” Although his voice remained light, his eyes betrayed his disapproval. “Most ladies tend to be very protective of their reputations.”

“I’m well aware of the danger of coming here. My parents are spending a few weeks with my sister in the country. My brother and his wife are also spending time with Eleanor. I had no one else to accompany me this afternoon, aside from my niece. Propriety is quite ridiculous when a lady cannot pay a call to an acquaintance without peril for her reputation. Particularly when the lady is all of five and twenty.”

“You are hardly on the shelf, Marisa.”

“I apologize if I have offended your sense of propriety. As I recall it’s an ancient flaw, one of many I believe you observed long ago.”

“I’m not a self-righteous prig, as you seem to imply. But we don’t live in an ideal world. And a lady’s reputation can be ruined quite easily.” He drew in his breath, as though needing to calm the anger she sensed simmering beneath his calm surface. He gestured toward a nearby sofa. “I don’t mean to keep you standing.”

She remained standing by the desk. “I shall not be here long. I assure you, I wouldn’t have come here if it were not urgent.”

He frowned. “What has happened?”

She studied him a moment, wondering how best to approach the subject. “Can you think of anyone who might want to murder you?”

“Murder me?”

“Yes. Can you think of anyone?”

“Not offhand.”

“No one at all?”

“You sound disappointed?”

Marisa released her breath in a long sigh. “I am.”

“You are disappointed that I know of no one who would like to murder me?”

“Yes. I was hoping you might be able to identify someone, a man who would like to eliminate you. It would make things easier.”

“I fail to see how that knowledge could make anything easier. I suppose you have a reason for hoping I might know someone who would like to murder me.”

“I suppose you didn’t notice, but I was at the Blackthorne ball last night. It was a bit of a crush. Lady Blackthorne is sponsoring her sisters this year and everyone on her list attended. I suspect more than the guest list came.” She pressed her hand to the base of her neck, hoping he might say something to assure her he had indeed noticed her in the crowded ballroom. “So I understand if you didn’t even know I was there.”

Clayton refrained from addressing her finely veiled inquiry. “What happened to make you think someone wanted to murder me?”

She crushed her irritation with the man. She hadn’t come here to address their past or the infuriating fact she had never recovered from their connection. “I overheard two men talking. One of them said you were a threat and must be eliminated.”

Clayton held her gaze. “Who were these men?”

“I didn’t see them.”

“You overheard two men discussing my murder in a crowded ballroom?”

“No. I noticed Hanley leading my niece into the gardens, so I followed. You know Hanley. He has a tendency to be a bit forward.”

“You followed? Where was her chaperon?”

“Actually, I’m helping to chaperon Beatrice this Season. My sister Eleanor has recently given birth. My brother Anthony and his wife Lily detest Town life, and they wanted very much to be with Eleanor, but they didn’t want to prevent Beatrice from enjoying the Season. They asked if I would help Aunt Cecilia chaperon her this Season.”

He stared at her, as though she had just stated her belief that fairies were indeed real. “You are acting as chaperon?”

“You needn’t sound so astonished. I’m five and twenty. I shouldn’t think it so extraordinary for me to act as chaperon, particularly when I’m merely assisting my Aunt Cecilia.”

He shook his head slightly. “Since you were acting as chaperon, you took it upon yourself to follow your niece and Hanley.”

“As I said, Hanley is on the prowl for a wife this Season, and he has always had the propensity for becoming a bit too warm, a bit too quickly.”

He smiled, his eyes remaining cool and appraising. “I suppose you learned this from experience.”

“I once kicked him quite briskly in the shin. We were near the fountain in the Summerfield’s garden, just off the terrace in full view of everyone on the terrace, so you needn’t get that disapproving look in your eyes. He lost his balance and ended up falling back into the arms of Poseidon. I believe the shower he received from the mouth of the statue cooled his interest.”

“He is quite fortunate you didn’t have a poker at the time.”

She smiled thinking of the first time they had met. “Pokers are quite inconvenient to carry in one’s reticule. I prefer to carry a pistol instead.”

“An old habit, as is your habit of finding yourself in difficult situations.”

“I only did what was reasonable. I’m helping to chaperon her after all.”

“One might argue how reasonable it is to put a child in charge of the nursery.”

“I’m not a child.” She clutched the silk cords of her reticule, bristling at the sardonic lift of his right eyebrow. The quicker she got this over with, the better it would be for her composure. “I entered the maze looking for Beatrice and Hanley. At the time I didn’t realize Beatrice had stepped onto the terrace and had given Hanley a proper set-down. She returned to the party by another door. I should have realized she wouldn’t tolerate Hanley’s nonsense. Beatrice is a most practical young woman.”

“It’s refreshing to hear your niece does not share your propensity for wandering about unattended. I suppose it never occurred to you the danger you might encounter if any of your legion of admirers decided to follow you into the gardens? The Blackthorn maze is very private. There are more than a few fortune hunters in London who wouldn’t hesitate to compromise you against your will.”

She fought to keep her composure under the glare of his disapproval. “I’m not a green girl. I have managed to survive seven Seasons without being compromised.”

Clayton studied her a moment and she wondered if he was thinking of the many times she had tried to coax him

into compromising her. Fortunately he refrained from reciting ancient history. “You entered the maze looking for your niece and you encountered two men planning to murder me?”

“I reached the center of the maze when I heard a man mention your name. Something in his tone caught my attention. He and another man were just on the other side of the shrubbery, so I had no trouble at all hearing them. One of them said, ‘We shall have to get rid of Huntingdon; he could ruin everything.’ The other disagreed, at least at first. But then he said, ‘You know better than I. But we must be careful. One wrong move could expose us.’ The other man said not to worry, he would ‘eliminate the threat.’ By threat he meant you. I heard them moving away, so I hurried through the maze, hoping to get a look at them.”

“You followed two men you thought might be plotting a murder? And you didn’t stop to think it might be dangerous?”

“I wanted to see who they were. Unfortunately, by the time I found my way out of the maze, they were gone. But I’m certain I would recognize the one man if I ever heard him again, the one who seemed intent on eliminating you. His voice was very distinctive.”

“Why the devil did your chaperon allow you to roam all over the gardens last night? No wait, let me guess. Your Aunt Cecilia was *your* chaperon last night.”

Marisa didn’t need a lecture from this man of all men. “I didn’t come here to discuss my need for a chaperon. I came here to warn you about a threat to your life.”

He inclined his head in a slight bow. “I appreciate your concern.”

She kept her voice low when she dearly wanted to shout at the man. “You are not taking this seriously, are you?”

“I see little reason to take it seriously.”

“I know what I heard.” She gestured with her hand as she spoke. Her reticule and the pistol inside bumped a brass figure of a unicorn on the desk, toppling it over the edge. She snatched for the figure. It slipped past her fingers.

Brass glinted in the sunlight slanting through the windows as the unicorn tumbled. It landed with a thud—on the tip of Clayton’s black boot. Marisa cringed at the sound of his soft gasp. She glanced from the scuff mark on the finely-buffed black leather to his face. His eyes were closed, his lips pursed, as though he had just had a tooth extracted against his will.

“I’m very sorry.”

He drew in his breath before he opened his eyes. “It’s all right. I think only one toe is broken.”

In spite of her embarrassment, his light tone made her smile. “I suppose we should be glad for small miracles.”

He smiled. “I suppose.”

She bent to retrieve the unicorn as he did the same. They collided, her brow whacking his jaw. The impact tossed her backward. She hit the floor, her bottom thumping hard against the carpet. Her head snapped back and slammed into the mahogany desk. A sharp stab of pain ripped through her skull followed by a slow flow of darkness at the edges of her vision.

“Marisa.” Clayton’s voice drifted to her, as though he stood on the other side of a thick velvet curtain. He knelt beside her and gripped her arm. “Are you all right?”

She tried to respond, to assure him she was fine. Yet the words she intended to speak escaped in a low moan.

“Good lord, Marisa. Have you cracked open your head?” He brushed his fingers over her cheek and then slid his fingers over the back of her head. She groaned when his questing fingers found a tender spot. “Thank heaven, there is no blood.”

“I’m fine,” she murmured, pushing her hat back from where it had slid over her brow. “Perfectly fine.”

He slipped one arm around her back, the other under her knees and lifted her. She rested her head on his shoulder and surrendered to his powerful embrace. It had been such a long time since she had felt his arms around her. Although she wouldn’t admit it to anyone, it was worth a solid rap to the head to feel his arms around her again.

Powerful muscles shifted against her as he carried her. The crisp clean scent of his skin teased her senses. The warmth of him surrounded her. She blinked trying to focus her eyes—the curve of his jaw, the slant of his sideburn, a thick black wave just above his ear. A horrible ache thrummed deep in her chest, a longing so deep and wide it filled her. Lord how she had missed him—his shy smile, his soft voice, the touch of his hand, the taste of his lips. She missed discussing novels with him, playing chess with him, racing horses with him, simply sitting in his company. She missed him, everything about him. No matter how hard she had tried, she had never pried him from her heart. She had a horrible feeling she never would.

Clayton laid her upon the sofa, soft cinnamon colored velvet cushioning her. He placed a pillow behind her head and touched her cheek. “Marisa, are you all right?”



## Chapter Two

Marisa's breath tangled in her throat. Clayton was so close, all she need do is lift just a little and she could kiss him. He had such nice lips, full and generous, with a perfect cupid's bow. As she remembered those lips were soft and firm and quite the most delicious thing she had ever tasted.

"Marisa?" he cupped her cheek in his hand. "Are you all right? You look a bit dazed."

In that moment he seemed completely unguarded, as vulnerable and lonely as she was. Pain and need, a horrible confusion, all shimmered in his eyes. The years slipped away, sweeping her back to a soft summer day, when he had held her for the first time.

He leaned closer. "Marisa."

He lowered his eyes his gaze resting on her lips. A soft sigh escaped his lips. His breath touched her face, warm, moist, infused with a faint scent of coffee. Without hesitation, she slid the tip of her tongue along her upper lip, knowing precisely what she was doing.

*Kiss me, Clay.*

Her heart pounded against her ribs, her breath tangled in her chest as she waited and hoped. For too many nights she had slipped into her bed wondering what might have been. For too many years she had lived a life suspended, moving through the days, a ghost of the girl she had been before Clayton had marched out of her life.

After he was gone, she had wandered through a life she didn't own, pretending to enjoy all the parties and amusements of the Season, keeping gentlemen at a safe distance from a heart they could never possess. From the first moment she had stumbled into Clayton's orbit, she had belonged to him, only him.

She saw confusion in his eyes, the same horrible confusion he conjured in her with his very existence. For one heart stopping moment she felt certain he would surrender. She hoped he would defy all the years and heartache, sweep aside the barriers that had ruined them all those years ago. She imagined he might still care.

He closed his eyes and drew in his breath. In that instant, she realized he wouldn't allow the past invade his carefully ordered life. Instead, he stood and looked away from her, as though he couldn't bear the sight of her. Lord in heaven, how had it all gone so wrong?

He crossed the room and opened one of the cabinets built into the mahogany-paneled wall. The soft ping of a crystal stopper falling into a crystal decanter sliced through the quiet room like a gunshot. After a moment he returned with a small stemmed glass and offered it to her. "Sherry might help clear your head."

She sat up, pain smoldering in the back of her head. Yet the pain of her own foolishness sank sharper and deeper into the vulnerable area near her heart than any physical pain. She accepted the glass, appalled at the trembling of her hand. "I'm sorry. I certainly didn't intend to cause such a fuss."

"It's all right."

No it wasn't all right. Nothing was all right. Did he ever think back to those few months when their future had seemed intertwined?

She sipped the sherry, welcoming the heat into her chest. She felt cold, as though she had been tossed naked into a snowy night. She supposed that is what came from laying one's heart bare to a man who didn't want anything she had to offer. Not for the first time in her life she wished she could snap her fingers and disappear. Change into a wisp of smoke. Slide through the cracks in the floor. Escape her foolishness. Yet she had learned long ago there was no such thing as magic, and floors seldom did what she asked of them.

"How are you feeling?"

"I'm fine." Except her dignity lay in a thousand bits and pieces scattered all around her.

It wasn't supposed to be this way. Nothing was as it should have been. She caught herself on the edge of a deep pool of regret, snatching for balance. Nothing could be gained by wishing for things beyond her reach. She had to forget him. She had come here with one purpose in mind.

"I know you find it difficult to believe, but I heard the tone of their voices last night. I know those two men were serious about their intent to murder you."

"I don't doubt you heard precisely what you said you heard. I do doubt they intended murder."

She handed him her glass. "What do you suppose they meant?"

He retrieved the unicorn from the floor and set it on the desk along with the glass. "People often mention things they would like to happen. Few have any intention of actually taking action to make those things come about. Murder is quite a drastic measure."

"It certainly is." Frustration rose in her until her hands trembled. "The man I heard is willing to take that drastic measure. You must take this seriously."

He moved toward her and paused in front of the sofa. "I suspect *you* are taking this far too seriously. You needn't worry about me."

She wanted to grab those broad shoulders and shake him until his teeth rattled. "You are every bit as stubborn as I remember."

"And you are every bit as impetuous as I remember."

"I'm sorry to have burdened you with my concern." She stood and swayed as a wave of dizziness swept over her.

"Easy." He gripped her arms and imposed balance.

She rested her hand on his chest and closed her eyes, allowing the dizziness to pass. "I'm fine."

"You should sit a while. You took a rather nasty bump."

"I'm fine." She looked up at him and caught a glimmer of the boy she had known hiding behind the disciplined mask of this stranger. "Although I know you think me a perfect hen-wit, they were serious."

"You should take care. The next time you wander off unattended you could find yourself in a great deal of trouble. Perhaps even married to a man you don't love."

She had no need to hear his disapproval of her behavior. He had made his sentiments clear years ago. *Marisa, you must pay proper attention to your behavior. We promised your parents we would wait a year. At every turn, you are there, like Eve with the forbidden fruit, trying your best to turn me into a dishonest blackguard. You must not continue in this fashion. It's not at all the right thing to do.* He hadn't changed. He still thought her a scandalous hen-wit.

She stepped back from him and marched toward the door with all the dignity she could manage. She paused with her hand on the door knob and cast him what she hoped was a regal glare. "Good day, Lord Huntingdon."

He inclined his head in a bow. "Good day, Lady Marisa. And please, don't give me another thought."

*Infuriating man!* She left the room and closed the door behind her. She took one indignant step then jerked to a halt. She glanced behind her to find the blue muslin of her gown stretched to the limit, the hem trapped by the closed door. "Lud!"

She reached for the brass door handle, hoping Clayton hadn't noticed her gown caught in the door. It certainly spoiled her rather dramatic leave of him. Her fingers brushed the cool brass just as the door opened. Her skirt swayed around her. She looked at him and cringed at the humor in his eyes.

"I caught my gown."

He nodded. "I noticed."

Heat prickled along her neck. She pivoted to leave. "Good-bye."

"Marisa."

She paused in the hall without turning to look at him, feeling the heat of her blush warm her cheeks. "What?"

"Thank you for your concern. I know it couldn't have been easy coming here today."

The dark current in his deep voice wrapped around her, tugging on her in unseen ways. She glanced over her shoulder and found him smiling at her, a warm, generous smile that sent her heart colliding into the wall of her chest. She managed a smile, while inside a vise squeezed her heart. "Please, take care. I know those men were serious."

He inclined his head in a slight bow. "I shall show you out."

She raised her hand when he moved toward her. If he touched her, even a slight brush of his hand against her arm, she wouldn't be able to keep her tears at bay. "I prefer to show myself out, thank you."

He halted in the hall, his face betraying his surprise. "Are you certain? You were a bit dizzy only a moment ago."

"I'm fine."

"You might fall."

"I can manage, thank you."

He looked at her as though he wanted to say something. In the end he settled for the only thing that remained between them—a farewell. "Good-bye, Mari."

"Good bye, Clay."

She turned, her footsteps tapping against the polished parquet as she walked toward the stairs leading to the main hall. Regret was useless. Still, she couldn't prevent it, any more than she could prevent the bitter ache pounding deep inside of her, or the sting of tears in her eyes. She wouldn't contemplate the past. It was useless. Wishing, hoping, praying couldn't change the past. No matter how much she wanted to slip back and alter what had happened seven years ago, it was impossible. She could only make the most of each day as it came.

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Clayton stood in the doorway of his library, watching until Marisa slipped from his view. Some perverse need led him across the library. He paused at a window overlooking the square, hungry for another glimpse of her. A few moments later Marisa emerged from his front door. Although she held herself stiffly, he couldn't notice any lingering effects of the blow to her head. He did notice the way the breeze stirred the long ebony curls that had spilled free of her pins. Her hair had always been as willful as the lady herself.

He rubbed the tender spot on his jaw where they had collided. In some strange way it was as if time hadn't passed here in London. Marisa was still the same—beautiful, beguiling, reckless, impetuous. Only time hadn't been so kind to him.

A curricule drawn by a pair of perfectly matched chestnuts pulled up in front of his house as Marisa crossed the sidewalk. His twin brother, Justin, tossed the ribbons to his tiger then climbed from the carriage. He exchanged a

few words with Marisa before helping her into her town coach.

Clayton was still at the window when Justin barged into the library and joined him at the window in time to see Marisa's carriage turn onto Brook Street. Clayton smiled at his brother. "Would you care for a whiskey?"

Justin's expression revealed his surprise at Clayton's offer. In another lifetime he wouldn't have indulged in whiskey at this hour of the day. No doubt his brother knew what had led him to drink. They had never been able to keep secrets from one another.

"What the devil was Marisa doing here?"

Clayton crossed the room and opened one of the mahogany cabinets built into the paneled wall. "She had some information she thought I might find interesting."

"And did you?"

"Not particularly." Clayton filled two glasses with Irish whiskey and joined Justin.

Justin accepted one of the glasses. "It must have been important for Marisa to come here."

"She thought it was." Clayton didn't take time to enjoy the rich aroma or savor the taste. He drained his glass in three long swallows, welcoming the heat of the aged whiskey into his chest. He glanced at Justin and tried to answer the questions he saw in his brother's eyes. "It was only some nonsense she heard at a party. Mari always had a fruitful imagination. I'm afraid it got the better of her this time."

Justin sipped his whiskey and studied his brother in that way he had of penetrating every defense Clayton tried to hide behind. *She still interests you, brother.*

Clayton could hear the words as clearly as if they had been spoken. Justin was eleven minutes his senior. They shared more than the same mold of features and form. They shared a bond neither of them had ever truly been able to explain to anyone else. When Justin had been brutalized in a cellar room of their family home of Chatswyck, Clayton had felt the pain. When Clayton had been wounded at Waterloo, he had later learned Justin had fallen to his knees, struck with an echo of Clayton's pain. They had been linked in this fashion since the first day they had drawn breath. At times, Clayton didn't enjoy the connection; it left him far too exposed.

Clayton turned away from his twin, unwilling to delve into his feelings for Marisa. In spite of his better instincts and the space of seven years, he still had an infernal attraction to the woman. Instead of dying a nice orderly death, the desire that had slammed into him the first day he had met her lingered, at times so strong it tortured him. Still, he had been burned once by getting too close to the flame. He knew better this time.

Justin drifted toward the chairs near the hearth. "She is still as handsome as ever. Perhaps more so."

"Yes, she is." Still, it wasn't her physical beauty alone that had drawn him to her. When he was young, he had loved everything about her—her way of running about with her hair tumbling from its pins, the fact she could beat him at chess, discuss novels and horses and politics without a thought to disguise her intellect. She breathed excitement. He seldom knew what she might do from one moment to the next. When he looked back on it, he had known from the very beginning the glorious, tempestuous Marisa would eventually lose interest in a quiet scholarly gentleman. He only wished he could find a way to forget her. Clayton crossed the room and sank into one of the leather wing back chairs near the hearth.

Justin sat across from Clayton and fixed his twin in a steady gaze. "She still interests you. Perhaps you should do something about it."

"She nearly destroyed me once. I learned my lesson."

"You were both young when you first met. Things might be different this time."

"You're right. I doubt I would survive this time." Since he had no intention of discussing Marisa, Clayton focused the conversation in another direction; a topic he knew would draw his twin's attention. "Have you had any word from Daventry?"

Clayton listened as his brother relayed the progress he was making on an intriguing puzzle that involved Justin's future bride, Miss Isabel Darracott. Clayton shaped sentences of his own that didn't sound like a man who had recently found himself caught in a whirlwind. He spoke without stumbling. Yet, in spite of his best efforts he couldn't relinquish thoughts of Marisa. The woman could knock his world off its axis with as little as a smile. It was humiliating to realize the command she could wield over his senses.

Justin twisted his empty glass in a stream of sunlight slanting through the windows behind him, sending shards of colored light flickering across the gold and cinnamon swirls in the carpet. "Since I'm getting married there is no reason to continue with your plan to find a bride this Season. Father wanted to make certain the succession was assured. I promise you, I shall do my best to produce an heir."

Clayton leaned back in his chair, leather sighing softly beneath him. "Before he died, I gave Father my word I would marry this Season."

"Father took advantage of your stubborn streak of responsibility, as he always did. You shouldn't feel obligated to him."

"I gave him my word."

"I suppose it's useless for me to try to sway you from your blockheaded decision."

A chill gripped him when Clayton thought of fulfilling his promise to his father. "I suppose."

Justin shook his head. "Do you still intend to choose your bride from that list Sophia drew up for you?"

Clayton frowned when he thought of the list of potential brides their grandmother had made at his request. Although he trusted Sophia to make a careful selection of the ladies available this Season, something about the young ladies he had met from the list made him uneasy. "Sophia has a discerning eye. She knows what I require in a companion."

"Companion? Is that how you think of a wife?"

"I don't want anyone to put demands on me I cannot satisfy. I want only as much as I am capable of giving. I want nothing to do with any female who believes in romantic nonsense."

Justin stared at Clayton, obviously unhappy with his response. "I would think something like affection might be appropriate in the selection of your wife. I believe you said the same to me."

"It's different for you and Isabel. She is a practical woman. Dependable. If you treat Isabel well, show her the respect and affection she deserves, she will be there for you the rest of your life. She loves you deeply."

Justin looked uncomfortable and Clayton realized it came from his own doubts about his nature. His brother wasn't certain he could be faithful to any woman, even Isabel. "I have seen that blasted list. There isn't a female on it that wouldn't end up boring you after a few weeks, if she didn't freeze you to death first. From what I could see the list contains nothing but ambitious, heartless harpies."

Clayton twisted his glass against the top of a pedestal table beside his chair. Of the ladies he had already met on Sophia's list, he had to admit his brother was right on the mark. Still, he had faith in his grandmother's judgment. One of the women on the list would suit him. How difficult could it be to find a quiet, dignified young lady with a practical disposition? "I'm not looking for excitement in marriage. I have had enough excitement to last a lifetime."

"From what Sophia told me you did have some requirements of any lady she added to the list. As I recall, your prospective bride must be intelligent, serious-minded, dignified, and dull."

"Dull?" Clayton frowned at his brother. "I don't recall requesting that particular attribute."

Justin shrugged. "It comes with the rest of the package. What you need is a woman who can make your blood burn."

Clayton had known a woman who could make his blood burn. A woman who was so unpredictable he never knew from one moment to the next what she might do. Marisa had been the biggest mistake of his life. "Fires have a way of burning out. And when they are done, ashes are all that is left."

Justin rolled his glass between his palms. "Sophia keeps reminding me she has never known a Trevelyan male to marry for anything other than true affection."

*Affection is for the weak, remember that. Emotions must be controlled.* Clayton hadn't truly understood the reason behind his father's words until he made the fatal mistake of handing his heart into Marisa's keeping. "I prefer to keep emotion out of my marriage decision. You can take passion. I will take practicality. I want peace. An orderly life, without anyone expecting me to be more than what I am, without a wife demanding I give more than I can give."

Justin stared into his empty glass, as though reading the future in the dregs of Irish whiskey. "I wonder why Marisa never married."

Clayton had asked himself that question many times. "Who can say why a woman like Marisa does anything? I suppose she never found her ideal."

"It certainly isn't for lack of opportunities. She still has half the men in London sniffing after her skirts, like stallions after a mare in season."

"Mindless fools those stallions. If they get too close to that particular mare, she will rear up and kick them straight in the head. Or somewhere considerably lower."

"I have remained acquainted with her." Justin fixed Clayton in a steady gaze. "I have never heard any rumors about her and any gentleman in particular. Ashbourne is her most devoted admirer, but she has never given him any indication she would accept him."

"Perhaps Marisa simply enjoys being sought after by a legion of admirers."

Justin studied his brother several moments before he spoke. "Have you thought of getting reacquainted with her? She is no longer eighteen. You are not the man you were seven years ago."

Clayton squeezed the arm of his chair, thinking of the changes he had forced upon his soul—none of them an improvement. "When he learned of our engagement, Father told me I was a fool to think a man of my nature could fix the interest of a lady who was willful and impetuous, as well as astonishingly handsome. He thought our engagement was doomed. Obviously he was right."

Justin shook his head. "The Duke had a propensity for underestimating you."

"Father thought I had spoiled your chances for happiness. He was convinced Marisa was perfect for you. I don't believe he ever forgave me for disobeying him and offering for her."

"The Duke thought he could control everyone. You know very well Marisa and I would have murdered each other in the first three months if we had ever married. I loved her as I would a sister. I always thought she was perfect for you. You balanced each other. I still think she is worth a second look. You can try to deny it, but you have never forgotten her."

Clayton stared into the hearth, where streaks of black against the bricks marked the passing of dead fires. “War changes a man, Justin. All of my sensibilities have been bludgeoned until there is nothing inside of me except dust. I have less to give Marisa now than I did seven years ago. And I wasn’t enough for her then.”

“I never could decipher the reason she cried off. She adored you.”

Clayton shook his head. “She adored romance. I just happened to be the only eligible male available to her that summer at Chatswyck. When she imagined herself in love, I was the focus of her daydream. It didn’t last long after she got a taste of Society and realized how easily she could command any gentleman who fell into her orbit.”

Justin didn’t look convinced. “Even if you don’t want to try again with Marisa, you need time to heal. Refuse all the inferno invitations. Avoid the chits trying to snag you as a husband. Take time to adjust to life out of the Army.”

“I’m not certain I ever want to feel again.” Clayton drew in his breath trying to ease the tightness centered around his lungs. “I’ve seen too much. I’ve done too many things. War is ugly in ways I hope you never understand. I doubt I can live with it if I start to feel again. I just want to find some peace in my life.”

“You are a great deal stronger than you think,” Justin said. “You always have been, even as a boy you were strong. Stronger than me in many ways.”

Clayton knew the truth. Their father had known the truth as well. Justin was the forceful twin, the man who could conquer the world if he set out to do so.

Justin pursed his lips as though he knew precisely what his twin was thinking. “You stood up to Wormsley and he beat you for your efforts. Still, he never broke you. I would have died in that cellar if not for you.”

Clayton clenched his jaw when he thought of the monster their father had hired as their tutor. Wormsley had nearly killed his brother in his attempt to bring the rebellious boy under his control. “There was little I could do.”

“You were ten. You stayed with me in that cellar. You slept on that cold stone floor so I wouldn’t be alone. Even after Wormsley beat you for disobedience, you still came to me. It was more than the food you slipped under that locked door. Knowing you were there, the candlelight flickering in the darkness, you will never truly understand what that meant to me. You saved me.”

“I only did what I could.” Clayton held his brother’s steady gaze. “It was hardly enough.”

“You have never believed anything you did was exceptional, because of that streak of responsibility you cannot disavow. Yet you are the most exceptional man I have ever known.”

“You would have done the same for me.”

“I would have done everything in my power to save you. I want to save you now, from this reckless idea you have of marrying one of those harpies on Sophia’s list. Take your time, Clay. Marriage is forever, unless you want to go through a tremendous ordeal getting rid of a mistake. Stay away from all the nonsense in this Town until you are ready to handle it.”

Clayton rubbed his temples. “I had forgotten how uncomfortable a London party could be. I feel more capable of handling French artillery than the young ladies of the *ton*. I didn’t truly expect to be subjected to the attention I have received since coming to London this year. It’s rather unsettling.”

“No doubt all the nonsense of the Season seems a bit overwhelming after being away from it for seven years. As I recall you were never fond of Society.”

“True. But it all seems worse now than it did when I was a boy.”

“You need to realize in many ways the ballrooms and drawing rooms of London can be every bit as treacherous as war.”

Clayton smiled. “I’m discovering that for myself.”

Justin leaned forward and rested his forearms on his thighs. “All of this wedding nonsense makes a man think hard about the future. Take your time, Clay. You get married to the wrong woman, you will regret it the rest of your very long and miserable life.”

“Don’t be concerned about me. I will find my way through the battle. Discipline is the key. Discipline and a sound plan for how I intend to live my life.”

Justin laughed, the sound rumbling from deep in his chest. “I had a sound plan. Isabel blew it to perdition the day she barged into my life. Until you meet a woman who can stir your blood, Clay, stay away from the altar.”

“Mutual respect. Companionship. That is all I expect or want in a marriage. It’s all I have to give.”



## Chapter Three

“Mr. Shrevesdale must be eliminated.” Emily St. James, Marchioness of Blackthorne, dropped a slip of paper on an ever increasing pile of parchment in the center of the rosewood table. “There is absolutely no other alternative.”

Marisa’s stomach tightened at her friend’s words, they reminded her far too keenly of the conversation she had overheard in the maze the night before. She sat at a round pedestal table in the blue drawing room of her father’s townhouse on Berkley Square. A short time after she had arrived home from her visit with Clayton, two of her closest friends had paid her a call to conduct a meeting of their Investigative Circle. Once a week the ladies discussed the true eligibility of the gentlemen pursuing marriage with various females of their acquaintance. Today she was finding it difficult to concentrate on any gentleman save one.

“It’s a pity.” Margaret MacLaren, the new Countess of Dunleith sipped her tea. With golden hair, green eyes, and a face that had inspired several sonnets written in her name, Meg had refused offers of marriage from many of the *ton*’s most eligible young men before being swept into a rather hasty marriage with the young man she had fallen in love with as child. “Shrevesdale is such an amusing young man.”

“Fortune hunters are usually amusing and often handsome.” Emily lifted a curl that brushed the shoulder of her sapphire blue gown and fiddled with the dark auburn strands. Since she had entered Society ten years ago, her beauty and her penchant for rich colors had made her an Original in the eyes of the *ton*. “It’s what makes them particularly dangerous.”

Years ago, after the disaster of Emily’s first engagement to a charming fortune hunter, Marisa and her two friends had formed the Investigative Circle as a means to unmask clever frauds. An heiress could never be too certain of the gentlemen paying her court. They had found it remarkably simple to gather information about the gentlemen of the *ton*. Over the years, they had extended their investigation to provide information to their friends and relatives. If a mama was in doubt about a certain suitor, she knew she could rely on the ladies of the circle to help determine his true purpose.

“Blackthorne told me the man is at least twelve thousand in debt. Little wonder he is sniffing after Clara’s skirts.” Emily dropped the abused curl. “Fortunately my sister has far too much sense to be fooled by his charm.”

Four years ago Emily had been the first of Marisa’s close friends to marry. Meg had met her match last year. Marisa had remained close friends with both women. Since they were young girls they had shared their joys, their triumphs, and their sorrows. Only now, as Emily enjoyed her life as wife and mother, and Meg was expecting her first child, Marisa wondered if she would ever know the happiness her friends had both found.

“I’m afraid I don’t have a good report concerning Mr. David Renwick.” Meg settled her cup on the porcelain saucer beside her. “Although I admit I have only met him in passing, from what I have been able to gather, the young man has taken up with a group of wealthy young miscreants who think drinking all night and terrifying the Watch is proper behavior for young gentlemen. Apparently Dunleith has heard the pack of young men may also be opium eaters. Unfortunately Mildred Heathcote’s daughter is quite taken with him.”

“Lord Renwick left Jamaica with the intention of introducing his children to proper Society. Perhaps he should have returned earlier.” Emily dipped her quill in an ink pot and jotted a few notes in a leather bound notebook as she continued. “Not only is his son disagreeable, I find Letitia a little high in the instep for my taste.”

“She is certainly ambitious,” Meg said. “I was surprised when she married Gregory Fitzwilliam. I was certain she was after a title.”

“I suspect Walter Fitzwilliam was anxious to steer his son back into Society. No doubt he wanted to wash away any stench of *trade* clinging to his son and daughters.” Emily lifted her chin, her eyes narrowing slightly. Her own father had made his fortune in trade, which had caused certain members of the *ton* to regard her in an inferior light. “And Renwick no doubt found the connection equally advantageous.”

“I understand Fitzwilliam being pushed into the match. He would never defy his father. But Letitia Renwick always seemed to rule her father,” Meg said. “Although Gregory Fitzwilliam is a handsome young man, and he will come into a sizable fortune, I thought Letitia had her heart set on becoming Ashbourne’s Countess.”

Marisa had to admit she had been more than a little relieved when Letitia had failed to win Ashbourne’s interest. Over the years he had become a close friend. She certainly didn’t wish to see him settled with a disagreeable female. Yet she had to admit she had more than his happiness in mind. She had grown far too accustomed to his warm regard. In some way she depended upon his interest. She also knew he wouldn’t wait for her forever. Good heaven, she didn’t want to end her days a spinster.

“One might say many things about her, but Letitia is certainly not subtle.” Emily crinkled her nose. “I suspect she is accustomed to getting precisely what she wants. She is spoiled beyond belief. I pity Gregory Fitzwilliam.”

“I’m surprised she married after only one Season.” Marisa lifted her cup, steam laced with the scents of sweetened tea and cream brushing her face before she tasted the smooth liquid. “I suppose her father convinced her how advantageous a match with Gregory Fitzwilliam would be.”

“She might be accustomed to getting what she wants, but Miss Renwick didn’t get what she wanted when it came to marriage.” Meg smiled at Marisa. “Since Ashbourne has another lady in mind for his Countess.”

“Unfortunately, as charming as I find him, I have never learned to share. And Ashbourne has never learned the importance of fidelity.” Marisa glanced up as one of her maids placed a small parcel on the table beside her. “Thank you, Hettie.”

“Milady.” The girl bobbed a curtsy and quietly left the room.

“I have never met Mr. Renwick. I suppose he might improve in time. I believe he is only three and twenty. And he will inherit a sizable fortune.” Emily made another notation in her notebook. “Still, I’m afraid we must inform Mrs. Heathcote it’s wise to divert her daughter’s attention.”

“Eleanor Heathcote is merely seventeen. She certainly has time to wait for a more suitable match.” Marisa pulled open the strings on the small package Hettie had delivered, wondering who had sent the parcel. She unfolded the thick brown paper and frowned at the lacy white cap that had been contained in the package. She lifted the note that accompanied it. The simple words effectively hit her squarely between the eyes with a truth she had been trying desperately to ignore.

Emily touched her hand. “Mari, what is it?”

Marisa glanced up from the note and looked straight into Emily’s concerned dark green eyes. “Apparently someone believes I’m quite ridiculous.”

“What the devil?” Emily plucked the parchment from Marisa’s hand. After reading the note she tossed it on the table. The parchment slid across the table and bumped into the package in front of Marisa. “You must not let this bother you.”

Meg lifted the lacy white cap, her lips pulling into a tight line. “Do you have any idea who sent this?”

Marisa lifted the note. *Lady Marisa, it’s time you faced the truth.* Simple words printed in black ink on cream colored parchment. Simple words that had pierced her with the venom of their intent. She could feel that poison swirling through her, stealing the warmth from her limbs. “Obviously it was sent by someone who thinks I’m making a fool of myself this Season.”

“Obviously someone who is envious of you.” Emily released her breath in an angry huff. “I would wager it was that horrible Penelope Witcher, or one of her cohorts. Honestly I have never in my life seen a pack of more disagreeable females. No doubt she sees you as a threat.”

Marisa forced her lips into a smile. “I suspect more than a few people think I’m ridiculous for attending the Season at my age. Perhaps I should have donned a cap this year. I considered it. Yet I wasn’t ready to give up hope. I know how pitiable I sound, but I don’t want to end my days a spinster.”

“You most certainly won’t end your days a spinster,” Emily said.

“When my brother asked me to help Aunt Cecilia, I was certain he and the rest of my family had conspired to make certain I didn’t stay in the country. I suspect my parents are more than a little disappointed I haven’t made an appropriate match.”

“If you continue in this fashion I will be obliged to poke you. Quite hard.” Emily squeezed Marisa’s arm. “We all know you could have a husband before dinner this evening if you chose to do so.”

“And we know why you haven’t chosen to do so.” Meg sipped her tea. “You didn’t say much about your visit with Huntingdon this afternoon. Aside from the fact he didn’t take the threat seriously.”

“He is certain I’m making more of this than I should.”

“I cannot imagine anyone wanting to murder Huntingdon,” Emily said. “The man is a paragon. Blackthorne holds him in high regard. They were on several missions together during the war and they remain good friends. In fact, if not for Huntingdon, my father would have been arrested for treason.”

Marisa knew the story behind the treachery that nearly destroyed Emily’s family. Clayton’s loyalty to Simon St. James had helped divert a horrible disaster. It was just another tribute to Clayton, just another reason he was so hard to forget.

“Each time I’m in his company I’m aware of how perfectly composed he is. Huntingdon carries such a sense of integrity about him. And I owe him so much.” Emily shook her head. “I cannot imagine anyone wanting to murder him. I keep hoping it is simply a mistake.”

“I hope I’m mistaken.” Marisa held her cup between her palms, seeking the warmth from the heated porcelain. “But, I feel I must do something to make certain he is not in danger.”

“I believe you have been avoiding Huntingdon since you arrived in Town for the Season.” Emily regarded Marisa a long moment in that quiet direct way she had of dispensing with pretense. “So tell us, what did you feel when you were in his company again?”

“I felt…” Marisa rubbed her thumb over the smooth handle of her cup, wondering how she could distill her feelings into words. “Huntingdon is very different than my memories of him. I’m not at all certain I know him now.”

“Do you want to know him?” Emily asked.

“When we met I had never known anyone like him before. I have never known anyone like him since. He always treated me as though I had a fully functioning brain. I could discuss anything with Huntingdon. Politics, philosophy, horses, books. He had a way of making me feel he cared for more than simply the way I looked. I truly believed he loved me, even with my flaws.”

Emily nodded. "I know what you mean. I feel that way with Blackthorne. He loves me even though I can be dreadfully stubborn at times."

"It all changed when we came to London that year. I wanted to tell everyone we were engaged, but my parents insisted we wait. And he was so distant." Marisa took a breath, her lungs constricted with regret. "For the past seven years I have thought about what happened between us. How everything went so horribly wrong. After that night in his library, I was hurt and angry. I said things I later regretted. The next thing I knew the engagement was ended. Three days later he marched off to war. We never had a chance to mend our differences. Everything remained broken and somehow unfinished. I always had this feeling that if he had stayed, we might have found a way back to one another. But we didn't have that opportunity."

"And now that he is back?" Meg asked softly.

"I think I must face a truth I have been avoiding for seven years." Marisa rubbed her fingertip against the smooth rosewood table top. "There is no reason to believe we are any better suited now than we were seven years ago. He had doubts we would make a successful match then, and I have not improved with time."

"You are a wonderful woman, with many fine qualities," Meg said.

Emily nodded. "Any man could consider himself fortunate to earn your regard."

Marisa smiled at her friends. "Huntingdon does not share your views. Nothing in his manner today suggested otherwise. I might have simply been an old acquaintance as far as he was concerned. I won't deny I still feel an attraction to him, but I think with time it will fade. Now that I realize it's truly ended."

Emily and Meg exchanged a look that spoke clearly. Neither of her friends believed she was ready to put Huntingdon in her past.

"I know what both of you are thinking. But I'm ready to put the past to rest. Truly."

Emily rested her hand on Marisa's arm. "Perhaps it's time to take another look at the gentlemen who would dearly like to earn your affection."

"Perhaps Andover, I know he is quite serious about marriage," Meg said.

"Or Ashbourne." Emily wagged her finger at Marisa. "Now don't give me that look. If any woman can tame his wicked ways it's you. And you have to admit, he must have strong feelings for you or he would have given up years ago."

Marisa had to admit, Ashbourne had a great deal to offer. In fact she knew several gentlemen who would make suitable husbands. If she could simply forget about the infuriating Lord Huntingdon, she might carve out a pleasant future for herself.

"I think we should make it our business to see Mari married by the end of the Season," Emily said, obviously delighted with the idea.

Meg tapped her fingertip against her lower lip. "Dunleith has a rather handsome cousin or two."

"Who better to find a proper husband for Marisa if not you and I?"

Meg grinned. "Believe me, Mari, I think you would rather enjoy being married."

Marisa thought of how close she had come to making a fool of herself this morning. It had taken every scrap of will to keep from kissing Clayton. She had never felt that horrible attraction to any other man. She wondered if she ever would. "As long as it's to the right gentleman for the right reasons. I don't wish to make a mistake out of desperation."

"You shall do no such thing. But it's time to heal, Mari. Time to take another look at gentlemen who are entirely eligible." Emily squeezed her arm. "We want you to be as happy as we are."

Marisa had only ever imagined being married to one gentleman. And that had led straight to disaster. It was time to look at the gentlemen who paid her court with a fresh perspective. This would be her last Season, her last chance to make a match. She would not waste any more precious time pining over Clayton Trevelyan. If she didn't feel obligated to save the man from a murderer, she would have nothing at all to do with the man.

"What are you going to do about this nasty business?" Meg asked. "Since Huntingdon didn't take the threat seriously, do you think he could be right?"

"There was something about one of the men last night. He sounded excited when he talked about eliminating Huntingdon. Almost as if he would enjoy murdering him." Marisa stared past Meg to the windows overlooking the walled garden. The breeze fluttered the blue brocade drapes. Beyond she could see the roses near the far wall. She had once arranged a picnic breakfast in the garden for a young man she had adored. It seemed a lifetime ago. "I think I would recognize his voice again."

Meg rested her hand over Marisa's hand. "I'm not at all certain searching for a man who thinks murder is entertaining is a very good idea."

"I shall be careful. As long as no one knows I can identify him, I should be perfectly safe. Of course I must find a way to make Huntingdon believe the threat is real."

"I could ask Blackthorne to speak with Huntingdon," Emily said. "They have remained well acquainted."

"Thank you. But I would rather not involve Blackthorne, at least not yet. Huntingdon would no doubt dislike my interference." Still there was someone who might be able to pound some sense into Clayton's thick skull. Marisa

just had to figure out how to see him without destroying her reputation. For the gentleman in question was notorious.

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The next morning, Marisa sat at her vanity and drew a needle and thread through the white turban she had found in the back of her mother's armoire. Although she had never become adept with a needle, she had enough skill to attach a thick white silk veil to the headpiece. If Clay refused to take the threat to his life seriously, she would simply have to take steps to protect the stubborn oaf. The first thing she needed was a disguise.

"Did you notice the way Mr. Rawlinson persisted in staying near Aunt Cecilia at the Trenton musicale the other night?" Beatrice reclined on the Grecian chase longue by the hearth, with the latest E.W. Austen novel propped open against her raised knees. "I believe he was making a valiant attempt to coax her into conversation. I saw her smile. At least I believe it was a smile, it may have been simply a bit of indigestion. But I thought it quite encouraging."

"I didn't notice. I'm afraid I found it far more entertaining to watch several young ladies chase various gentlemen around the room." There had been more than a hundred people in the Trenton ballroom. Yet of all the people in the room Marisa had been far too interested in watching one gentleman in particular. "Miss Hendricksen very nearly killed a man in her quest to corner Huntingdon. I believe Mr. Carleton was nearly struck senseless when the harp toppled over on him."

"It would be hard to tell with Carleton. I always feel it's an effort for him to put together enough words to form a short sentence."

Marisa smiled when she thought of another shy gentleman. "You can never tell with quiet gentlemen, Trice. Mr. Carleton might be interesting if you took the time to draw him out."

"Perhaps. I will say Martha Hendricksen could use a few lessons in subtlety. She has been taking advice from that dreadful Penelope Witcher. Do you know she actually advocates stepping out in front of a man's carriage to catch his attention?"

"That could prove inconvenient if not timed properly. Not to mention a bit messy."

"Fainting against gentlemen is another of the tactics she and her pack of harpies employ." Beatrice waved her hand in a dismissing fashion. "If a lady cannot engage a gentleman without resorting to such nonsense, the lady has no chance of fixing his interest in the first place. And if the tactics did succeed on a gentleman, I suspect that gentleman would be as stupid as a stone and not worth the effort."

"Not all young women are as practical as you are, Trice."

"London is filled with hen-wits." Beatrice twisted a dark brown curl around her finger, her unbound hair tumbling in long, heavy waves around her shoulders. "Kitty said her mother had heard a rumor in her day that Aunt Cecilia had a tendrè for another gentleman. Kitty's mother implied Cecilia had never intended to accept Trowbridge, but her parents sent the gentleman she truly wanted to marry packing because he wasn't considered suitable by her father. And then Trowbridge ran off with another woman. I never met my great-grandfather. Do you imagine Great-Grandfather Westbury might have done something like that?"

"If Grandfather Westbury believed the gentleman was unsuitable for Cecilia he definitely would have sent him packing by any means at his disposal. He was a forceful man. And parents do tend to get protective when it comes to marriage."

Marisa drew the thread through the white silk, her thoughts returning to her own disastrous engagement. Her mother's words echoed in her memory. *I cannot believe this will be a success, Marisa. Although he is a lovely young man, Clayton is far too reserved for you. He is a quiet scholar you pounced upon this summer. I fear your romantic nature has gotten the better of you. I'm afraid you shall eventually drive him to distraction. And I'm not altogether certain he shall be able to hold your interest. In the end I fear your marriage would prove a disaster. I really must insist you have a Season before we announce this engagement.* "At times I suppose a parent truly knows what is best."

"I understand Mr. Rawlinson made a fortune in the Indies. He only recently returned to England. They say he is as rich as a nabob. And he never married. Rumor is he suffered a disappointment in his youth. I think that is quite interesting. It does make me wonder."

Marisa glanced at her niece. "What do you wonder?"

"I wonder if Mr. Rawlinson might have an interest in Aunt Cecilia." Beatrice grinned, a glint of excitement entering her grey eyes. "I suspect he does. In fact, I believe he is quite obvious in his interest."

"Beatrice, Aunt Cecilia has a rather poor opinion of the male of our species."

Beatrice twisted her hair around her finger. "Perhaps it's time for Aunt Cecilia to find her proper match."

Marisa cut the thread and set her sewing needle aside. "If you are thinking of playing match-maker, I would suggest it could end badly."

"Aunt Cecilia is not so very old. And she is still quite handsome. Kitty said she wishes she had Cecilia's figure. And Mr. Rawlinson is a very nice man, and I think he is handsome, if one prefers dark blond hair and blue eyes. Even though I don't, I suspect Aunt Cecilia might. And he is still very athletic looking, even though he is near forty. I would wager he is looking for a bride this Season."

“And I would wager he is looking for some pretty young chit straight out of the school room. Men often prefer brides a great deal younger than they are.”

“True. But I have noticed Mr. Rawlinson pay attention to Aunt Cecilia on other occasions as well. He escorted her into dinner at the Redferns.” Beatrice tapped her fingertip against her chin. “And, she actually danced with him at the Blackthorne party the other night.”

“I have seen her dance on other occasions.” Marisa plopped the turban on her head. “You should not read too much into it.”

“Why in the world are you donning a turban? It’s hardly the fashion for one your age.”

“I need a disguise.” Marisa tugged the turban low and tucked her hair into the hat, wincing as her fingers encountered the tender spot at the back of her head.

“A disguise? Whatever for?”

“I’m about to pay a call on the Duke of Marlow, and I would prefer if no one recognizes me.”

Beatrice stared at her aunt, her mouth open, her eyes wide. “You are going to walk into the Duke of Marlow’s house?”

“Really Trice, you make it sound as though I’m going to stroll into a lion’s den and announce dinner is served.”

“How did you convince Aunt Cecilia to accompany you?”

“I didn’t.” Marisa smiled at her eldest brother’s daughter. “I believe she said something about having her nails pulled off before she would set foot in that house. I’m going alone.”

“I can understand her sentiments.” Beatrice pursed her lips in a perfect impression of a governess displeased with her charge. “Why in the world would you pay a call on the Duke? Alone? You do realize he is one of the most notorious libertines London has ever seen. I must say I don’t believe this is a good idea. In fact, I believe it’s a terrible idea. I really don’t believe you should visit him. No, you really must not visit the Duke.”

Although she was only twenty, Beatrice had a habit of trying to manage everyone in her orbit. She had inherited her beautiful mother’s dark brown curls and large grey eyes, but Lily’s shyness hadn’t influenced her eldest daughter in any respect. Beatrice had all the confidence and poise of a queen who had ruled over her kingdom since the time she was a child.

“I shall be fine. There is no need for your concern. Marlow and I were close friends a long time ago. In fact I thought of him as a brother.”

“A brother? Marlow?”

“Yes. We spent a summer at the Duke’s country estate when I was eighteen. Marlow’s father and Father were good friends.” Marisa hoped Beatrice wouldn’t try to explore that particular episode in her life. Her engagement to Clay hadn’t only been kept a secret from the *ton*, but from most of the family as well. She had no desire to be known as the tragic figure of the family. Cecilia held that position.

Beatrice stood and pressed her hand to the base of her slender neck. “What if someone should recognize you? Your reputation would be utterly ruined. The scandal would touch all of us.”

“I’m well aware of the danger of visiting a man with Marlow’s reputation.” Marisa pulled the veil she had attached to the hat down over her face. It was a little lopsided, and she was beginning to have doubts about the thickness of the material she had chosen. Sewing wasn’t one of her accomplishments. She stared through the thick white silk, trying to distinguish her features in the mirror. Peering through the veil was like looking through a thick white fog. “I’m confident no one will recognize me. I only hope I don’t walk into a wall.”

Beatrice folded her hands at her waist and addressed Marisa the way she might a stubborn child. “Aunt Marisa, you really must reconsider. You cannot go to see the Duke alone. It’s far too dangerous.”

“I have known Justin Trevelyan for many years. I realize he has acquired the reputation of being the most dangerous libertine in London, but I have always known him to be kind and generous.”

“Kind and generous! He compromised Miss Darracott and forced her to agree to marry him. He is capable of anything.”

“Lud!” Marisa waved aside Beatrice’s concerns. “I don’t believe for a moment Marlow would force a woman into marriage. If anything he has had to dodge all the women who have thrown themselves at him.”

“All of my friends agree.” Beatrice lifted her chin. “Miss Darracott had no choice.”

“You and your friends have painted Marlow as a barbarian who has dragged back a prize from a town he pillaged. You should not judge solely on one’s reputation. I know he is a deeply honorable man. He may choose to ignore certain rules of propriety from time to time, but I for one don’t consider that a terrible flaw in one’s character.” Unlike certain other people who came to mind.

“Everyone knows Huntingdon was paying Miss Darracott his addresses for weeks. All of my friends are certain the Duke forced her into accepting him. What type of man steals the lady his brother intends to marry? A scoundrel.”

Marisa felt a tightening in her chest, even though she fought against it. For weeks she had watched while Clayton showed a marked interest in Miss Darracott. He had certainly behaved like a man who had lost his heart.

Still, she refused to believe Justin would do anything so vile. "I don't believe it."

"You have heard the rumors. All of my friends agree. Miss Darracott intended to marry Lord Huntingdon, until that dreadful incident at Marlow House."

"It's not wise to believe gossip." Unfortunately, Beatrice counted in her circle of friends several of the *ton's* most notorious young gossip mongers. "I cannot believe Marlow ever would have offered for Miss Darracott if he thought his brother intended to marry her. And I certainly don't believe he forced her into accepting him. Marlow is sought after for a reason."

Beatrice considered this a moment then nodded. "Marlow is very dashing, which only means he is not the sort of man a lady should call upon under any circumstance. Any man who would destroy the happiness of his only brother is a man who cannot be trusted."

"Marlow would never do anything to purposely harm his brother." Still, what if both brothers had fallen in love with the same lady? It wouldn't have been a matter of Justin crushing Clayton; it would have been a matter of the lady's choice. Oh she really didn't want to think of that possibility. "I can assure you, Marlow certainly would never harm me."

"Aunt Marisa, you really must reconsider. If anyone recognizes you, my reputation as well as your own would be tarnished. We wouldn't be accepted into any home. We would both be ruined."

Marisa patted her niece's arm. "There is no need for concern. I have had the crests covered on Papa's town coach. I'm taking only Tomkin and Ralph, and they are both in black livery and are wearing wigs. At this time of morning few people will be out and about. So you see I have taken great precautions. If anyone sees me, no one will recognize me."

Beatrice released an exasperated sigh. "Aunt Marisa, at times you are far too impetuous."

"It's one of my many faults. Now, you shall have to excuse me. I must see if I can convince Marlow to pound some sense into his stubborn brother's rather thick head."

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Twenty minutes later, Marisa entered the Duke of Marlow's library. Through the heavy white silk of her veil she could see Justin standing near the fireplace. Unfortunately she could see little else. She bumped into the arm of a sofa as she attempted to cross the room.

"Do you intend to tell me who you are, or shall I guess?" he asked, his deep voice reminding her of his brother.

"It's dreadful looking through this." She lifted her veil and smiled at him. "Did you know me?"

"Marisa." Justin smiled as though he were pleased to see her. "I thought it was you, but I wasn't certain."

"You have such a wicked reputation, Justin. Even if I brought my mother as a chaperon, I would be the topic of gossip for weeks." She offered him her hands.

Justin took her hands in a firm grasp. "And did you give any thought to my reputation when you came here so mysteriously?"

"When did you start to worry about your reputation?"

"When I became the guardian to three females."

"Oh." Marisa grimaced, annoyed at herself for overlooking the change in his circumstance. "I confess, I didn't consider that situation."

"And did you think of what my fiancée might think if someone told her a mysterious woman was seen at my house? And no doubt the gossip is already spreading through the *ton* like fire through a drought stricken forest."

She should have considered all the consequences before she came here. She squeezed his hands. Any woman who truly loved a man would believe in him despite all the gossip in the world. "On the few occasions when we have spoken, I have found Miss Darracott remarkably sensible. She is intelligent and amusing. I commend you on your choice of a bride. I know she has become acquainted with Emily and they are well on their way to becoming good friends. I look forward to knowing her better. I'm certain you could set her straight, if she hears of my visit."

"You have such faith in my powers of persuasion."

"Justin, even if Miss Darracott were not sensible, you could convince her of your innocence. You could charm a devoted man-hater like my Aunt Cecilia to run away with you, if you put your mind to it."

"Fortunately, I have never set my mind on that particular course."

"I must say, I'm glad to hear you care about what your fiancée might think. There are so many dreadful rumors about your engagement. I thought they were all a lot of humbug. No woman could ever trap you into doing anything, particularly marriage. And as for you forcing *her* into marriage..." She waved her hand in an elegant gesture of dismissal. "Nonsense. You have never needed to force a female into doing anything, except perhaps to get her out of your house. By the way, have I wished you happy?"

Justin took her arm and led her toward one of the leather armchairs near the hearth. "I suspect you didn't come here this morning to wish me happy."

"No." Marisa sat on the chair and arranged her gown around her. "I came here to ask you to talk some sense into your brother's stubborn head."

Justin rested his arm on the mantel. "This concerns the same thing you went to see him about yesterday?"

"Did he tell you about it?"

"Only that you overheard something at a party."

She released her breath on an agitated sigh. "It's like him to take such news with such dreadful composure. I suspected he would do nothing about it. That is why you simply must help me hammer some sense into his head."

"I might do better if I knew what this was all about."

"Murder."

Justin blinked. "Murder?"

She plaited the fringe of her white paisley shawl as she related the events that led her to believe someone wished to murder Clayton. Justin listened intently and questioned her on a few key points. Unlike his brother he seemed genuinely concerned. "I'm certain I would recognize the one man if I ever heard him again. He was very distinctive."

"What did Clay say about this? Did he have any idea who these men might be, or what they might have been talking about?"

"He is certain it's all some misunderstanding on my part. He knows of no one who would like to murder him." Marisa smiled, while she tamped down the anger flashing inside of her. "I, on the other hand, can well imagine wanting to strangle Clay."

Justin studied her face. "You are concerned about him."

"Of course I'm concerned. I heard them. I know they were serious."

Justin's eyes narrowed and she had the uncomfortable feeling he could see straight through any attempt she might make to hide her feelings. "I understand."

She rose from her chair. "You have to speak with Clay. He must take care. We have to look for these men. They must be stopped before he comes to any harm."

He nodded. "I will speak with him."

She smiled. "If anyone can talk some sense into him, it's you."

He took her hand. "I will do my best to resolve the problem. I'm meeting with him this afternoon at Manton's."

Marisa squeezed Justin's hand. "I know you will not fail me, Justin."

Justin slid his thumb over the back of her gloved hand. "After you ended the engagement, I expected you to announce your engagement to another man."

She stiffened at his blunt honesty. "Did you truly imagine I was dishonorable enough to seek the interest of another man while I was engaged to Clayton?"

"I didn't mean to insult you, but I know how many gentlemen were trying to fix your interest. Gentlemen have been known to knock one another aside in an effort to get near you. I recall Hornsby ending up with a plate of cake on his head one night, and the refreshment table being overturned at the Somersby's party."

"I don't know why men believe women should be flattered if they treat us like pretty ornaments. It's not as though my face or figure is an accomplishment. I had nothing to do with either. My parents are solely to blame for my appearance." Marisa fixed him in her most regal glare. "Do you imagine I'm responsible for the absurd behavior of certain imbeciles when it comes to a peculiar fixation on the cast of my features?"

"You should know that slaying look shall not bother me, my dear." He lightly tapped her chin with his fingertip. "You were eighteen when you were engaged to my brother. The most dazzling, sought after young lady in London. I thought it likely another gentleman, perhaps someone who appeared to have a great deal more dash than my brother might have caught your interest."

"You, of all gentlemen, should know I never placed much value on dash and daring. If I had I would have lost my heart to you that summer at Chatswyck, rather than your quiet brother. Few men have more dash or daring than you."

He smiled and she wondered if he was thinking of the first time they had met. She had mistaken him for his brother, which led to her throwing herself into his arms and kissing him. Justin hadn't needed much encouragement. He had taken her mouth in an open mouthed assault. One touch of his lips upon hers and she had known her mistake. In the end it had taken a rather swift kick to his shins to escape Justin's heated embrace.

"I thought you had lost your heart to Clay. That is why I never expected you to end your engagement."

"It became obvious that we wouldn't suit. We were fortunate my parents insisted we wait a year to announce our engagement."

Marisa stared at the figure of Zeus carved into the white marble fireplace. The truth couldn't be escaped. She had pursued Clayton that summer at Chatswyck. She had thrown herself at him, tempted him until he had succumbed and kissed her. Her lack of any regard for propriety was merely one of her many faults. And Clayton breathed responsibility. Nobility coursed through his veins. He would rather cut off a limb than do anything dishonorable. She had given him no choice in offering for her. She had given him a choice when it came to ending the engagement.

"Clayton and I both realized we were making a mistake."

"Are you saying Clay wanted to end your engagement?"

"After arriving in London I soon realized I was forever insulting his sense of propriety." Clayton had pushed

her away time and time again. Every time she had tried to convince him to elope with her, he had retreated further behind his castle walls. In the end, after she had done her best to seduce him, he had admitted he was having doubts about their future together. "It was clear we were headed for disaster. We both saw it."

Justin considered her words a moment before he spoke. "I can understand why you would end the engagement if you thought you were headed for a disaster. I wonder if you may have been mistaken in thinking he agreed with you."

Doubts had plagued her over the years, until she couldn't go through a day without thinking of what might have been. "After we ended the engagement, I heard he had purchased a commission. I thought perhaps I was mistaken and I had led him to do something reckless."

"I had never heard him speak of entering the Army until after the engagement was ended."

"I can assure you his decision to enter the Army had more to do with Harry Fitzwilliam than it did me."

"Harry Fitzwilliam? What the devil did he have to do with it?"

"Apparently Fitzwilliam had been filling Clayton's head with thoughts of adventure and glory awaiting them on the battlefield. You know what Fitzwilliam was like, as wild and reckless as he was charming. I could well understand Fitzwilliam's desire to march off to war. Chasing after adventure suited him."

"But not my brother." Justin shook his head. "Clay never liked hunting of any kind."

Marisa thought of that last night with Clayton, a glimmer of the pain she had felt that night still lingering inside of her. "The night before he left for the peninsula, I met with Clay. I begged him not to march off to war. And he assured me I had nothing at all to do with his decision to purchase a commission. He said he was one and twenty and he had lived his life only through the pages of books. He said he now realized he was far too young to settle down as a married man. Since he no longer had his obligation to me, he thought it time to seek some adventure."

Justin stared at her a long moment as though he were weighing everything she had said to him. "I suspect seeking adventure was only one of his reasons for purchasing that blasted commission."

She glanced down at her black shoes peeking out from beneath her white gown. "I had no influence on him I can assure you of that."

Justin slipped his fingers beneath her chin and coaxed her to look at him. "There was never another woman who meant anything to Clay. Only you. Do you find that interesting?"

The implication in his words stirred inside her, awakening the hope she had tucked away in her heart. It was dangerous believing in all the possibilities inspired by that delicate seed of hope. Far too dangerous. "I suspect your brother has rather high standards. And he has become much more adept at avoiding entanglements with impetuous females."

"I always thought you were exactly what he needed."

Marisa looked into eyes disturbingly similar to the ones that still haunted her dreams. "I'm afraid you were mistaken. I believe I'm the last female he would want to marry. You see I have far too many flaws for your brother. No doubt he would prefer a woman who is quiet and reserved, who shall never do anything to disturb his carefully structured life. No matter how hard I try, I would never fit that mold of perfection he so desires."

Justin winked at her. "He may not know what he really needs."

"I doubt many men do. Although I suspect you might be an exception. I think Miss Darracott is precisely what you need."

"I intend to marry her before she realizes the horrible mistake she has made in her choice of husbands."

"I think she is a very fortunate young lady. You are a wonderful man." Marisa was surprised to see Justin Trevelyan actually look a bit uncomfortable by her compliment. "Justin, I'm so very sorry about coming here this way. If you like, I shall pay a call on Miss Darracott and explain my visit today."

"Isabel is a remarkable woman." Justin smiled, a warmth entering his eyes that left no doubt of his affection for his fiancée. "You needn't concern yourself. I shall make certain my fiancée has no concerns about any rumors that might reach her ears about a mysterious lady in white."

Regrets swirled around her as she left Justin's home. It was never wise to stir up the past. Yet at times she couldn't escape the memories. The summer at Chatswyck seemed no more than a dream, an idyll that hadn't survived the cool winds of autumn. It was over. Of course it was over. She would be a fool to believe any spark remained between them.

She leaned back against the black velvet squabs of the coach as it rumbled along Piccadilly. She was no longer a foolish eighteen year old girl. She would be a fool to try again with Clayton, particularly when rumors abounded about a certain list he had of prospective brides. Lord help her, just the thought of Clayton married to another woman made her feel sick deep inside.

"Fool," she whispered.

Only a fool destroyed her life over one infuriating man. Now that he was home, safe from the war, she would have the opportunity to purge him from her soul. It might have taken seven years for her to come to her senses, but it wasn't too late to set a new course. Plenty of eligible gentlemen still sought her interest, even if she was past the first blush of youth. Perhaps it was time to create a list of her own; filled with prospective husbands.



## Chapter Four

The scent of burning beeswax mingled with the fragrance of various sweet waters and perfumes in the large room. The aromas drifted in the air with the musky scent of overly heated humans packed together in the crowded confines of the ballroom of Dunleith House on Park Lane.

Marisa stood near the dance floor with Emily and Meg. Several gentlemen stood in a group behind them in conversation. Marisa concentrated, trying to hear their voices over the music and the low din of laughter and conversation in the huge room. Could the blackguard intent on murdering Clay be here tonight?

“Are you certain you wouldn’t like to have Blackthorne speak to Huntingdon about this?” Emily glanced across the room to where her husband stood in conversation with several other gentlemen. “He and Huntingdon are very good friends.”

“I spoke with Marlow yesterday. I’m hoping his brother can convince Huntingdon to take the threat seriously. I would rather not have him feel I’m sending an army at him.” Marisa followed Emily’s gaze to where Blackthorne stood on the landing leading from the entry hall to the two wide curved steps descending into the ballroom.

Simon St. James, Marquess of Blackthorne, stood a little taller than the other two men in the group. With black hair and dark eyes, he drew the attention of any woman who caught a glimpse of him, even though it was clear the handsome young peer had no interest in any lady save the one he had married. Blackthorne glanced toward Emily, as though he sensed her gaze upon him. Even from a distance, Marisa could see the warmth in his expression as he looked at his wife.

“I’m certain he…” Emily paused, as though meeting her husband’s gaze had distracted her.

“We have lost her now,” Meg said. “Emily cannot think clearly when Blackthorne looks at her a certain way.”

Emily looked at her friend and smiled. “You should look in a mirror when Dunleith is near.”

Meg laughed softly. “I shall admit I do have a weakness for the wicked Highlander.”

Marisa glanced to the dance floor and found Clayton moving through the steps of a country dance with Lydia Ingleby. Was she on his list? She still couldn’t believe Clayton had actually asked Sophia to make a list of prospective brides for him. Had he truly become so glacial in nature?

Meg slipped her arm through Marisa’s. “Mari, you are being a bit obvious. Take care.”

Marisa looked away from Clayton. “Thank you.”

“Smile, Mari.” Emily took Marisa’s hand. “Make him realize precisely what he is missing.”

Meg smiled at Marisa, her eyes revealing her affection for her friend. “You know Mari, I think you should test Huntingdon’s reserve. I cannot imagine he would be able to resist your charm.”

Marisa thought of all the times she had tested the gentleman’s reserve. The last time had involved a rather lovely red dress she had slipped out of in front of him. The man had resisted her that night in his library. She suspected he hadn’t changed. Humiliation stirred inside of her, awakening the anger that lurked in the shadows, anger at the man who had destroyed all her dreams. “I think it might be wise to allow certain flames to die.”

“Perhaps.” Meg squeezed her arm. “In that case we need to look elsewhere. What do you think, Emmie? I’m convinced Mari should consider Ashbourne.”

“If I’m not mistaken, Ashbourne is approaching with the purpose of claiming this dance.” Emily smiled at Marisa. “He certainly has been persistent over the years. And you cannot deny he is pleasant to look at.”

Marisa had to admit, Braden Fitzwilliam, Earl Ashbourne, was a handsome specimen of the male of their species. Tall, athletic, his sleek black coat molded his broad shoulders. His thick, dark brown hair gleamed in the candlelight, revealing a hint of chestnut hidden in the glossy waves. Carved with strong angles and curves, his face was sculpted to please the feminine eye. Beneath dark brows, dark brown eyes regarded her with a warm admiration that might send a less studious female into a swoon.

They had met soon after she had arrived in London seven years ago, and he had been her most ardent suitor since that day. Unfortunately, Ashbourne had a rather profound lust for women. From everything she had learned of him over the years, he liked variety. Marisa doubted marriage would prevent him from seeking amusement with other women.

“Glorious Psyche.” Ashbourne inclined his head in a bow and offered her his gloved hand. “I believe you belong to me.”

“It’s a quadrille, Ashbourne.” Marisa smiled in what she knew was a coy fashion. Flirtation came quite easily to her. “You shall have to share.”

Ashbourne issued an exaggerated groan as he slipped her arm through his, a rich scent of herbs and sandalwood soap filling her senses. “One day, my lady, I shall convince you to be mine.”

Marriage to Ashbourne would have certain advantages, Marisa thought as she walked beside him to the dance floor. Young, handsome, intelligent, he could keep her amused, if she were willing to overlook his penchant for infidelity. Odd, she had never truly imagined marrying a man other than Clayton. Still, she wouldn’t enjoy remaining a spinster while he married and had children and a life without her. No, she had no intention to remain a spinster

after Clayton married. It was certainly time to take a good look at her future rather than her past.

Ashbourne led her through the steps of the dance with the same calm assurance he did everything. The other ladies in the set cast him glances, and she caught herself wondering if Mrs. Capshaw might know Ashbourne better than the other ladies did. Affairs with married women wouldn't be outside his experience, Marisa thought. Could marriage alter him at all?

Soon after the dance, she drifted from Ashbourne in an effort to investigate a group of gentlemen standing near the entrance to the card room. Conversation and laughter mingled with the music drifting from the minstrels' gallery, conspiring against her.

"Lady Marisa."

Marisa started at the soft touch of Letitia Fitzwilliam's hand upon her arm. "You startled me."

Letitia smiled, a slight curve of her lips that made Marisa fear she had something stuck in her teeth. Small, with dark brown hair and blue eyes, she would have been lovely if not for the fact she always looked as though she had caught the scent of something unpleasant. "You don't look as though you are enjoying the party. I believe I have noticed you dance only a few times. It would seem you even managed to extricate yourself from Ashbourne's tight grip. I'm surprised you don't have stains on your gown from the way he drools over you."

Marisa met Letitia's thinly veiled insult of her friend with a smile. "Although I enjoy his company immensely, I realize Ashbourne is always in great demand. I fear the ladies here tonight would find me quite shabby if I were to deprive them of his company."

"How very generous of you." Letitia sighed as though she were bored with the conversation. "I must say I was surprised when you decided to attend the Season this year."

"Surprised?"

"Not many ladies continue to attend at your age." Letitia opened her fan and flicked it slowly beneath her chin, fluttering the carefully fashioned curls over her brow. "I hope you don't think I mean to imply you are too old to attend the Season."

"Of course not. That would be terribly ill mannered of you."

"Yes." Letitia tapped the fan against her chin. "I simply wonder why you have never accepted one of your admirers. Ashbourne dangles after you in such an obvious fashion. I suspect you cannot turn without tripping over him. And he is only one of many."

"I suppose I have taken more time than is fashionable to accept an offer." The young woman was certainly obvious, Marisa thought. "Ashbourne is a dear friend. I enjoy his company and I'm certain he would make a wonderful husband."

Letitia snapped her fan closed. "Does this mean you have finally decided to accept his offer?"

"I appreciate your interest in my future." Marisa noticed the way Letitia gripped her fan. She wondered precisely what had transpired between Ashbourne and Letitia. It wasn't like Ashbourne to lead an innocent female to believe he had an interest where one didn't exist. Yet it was clear Letitia bore the gentleman a grudge of major proportion. "And I must assure you, there is no need to be concerned, Mrs. Fitzwilliam. I shall take care with my decision."

"There you are, Aunt Marisa." Beatrice took Marisa's arm. "I hope you don't mind Mrs. Fitzwilliam, but I must steal my aunt from you."

Letitia shook her head. "I don't mind at all."

Beatrice ushered Marisa toward the refreshment table on the far side of the room. When they were a safe distance from Letitia, she spoke. "I thought you needed rescuing from that dreadful young woman."

Marisa eased her way past a group of ladies standing on the fringe of the dance floor. "She can be rather unpleasant."

Beatrice took a glass of lemonade from a silver tray when they finally wended their way through the crowd and reached the table. Although she lowered her voice to a conspiratorial level, she still managed to sound like a strict governess when she spoke. "If you hadn't been standing about, Mrs. Fitzwilliam wouldn't have been able to pounce. Standing about at balls will hardly find you a husband. I don't believe you have danced more than three times the entire evening."

"Mrs. Fitzwilliam said the same thing, Trice. I would be careful to ape such a woman."

Beatrice rolled her eyes. "Really Aunt Marisa. I'm merely concerned about your future. That female is jealous she never had the attention you do. Attention you have squandered over the years."

"I suppose I should be exploring my possibilities. I'm afraid I have been a bit distracted this evening."

Beatrice fixed her aunt with a disapproving glare. "I do hope you haven't been trying to locate those two men you overheard in the maze."

Marisa leaned close and lowered her voice. "If I hear that one man again, I will know his voice. I'm certain of it."

“Do you honestly imagine someone here might want to murder Lord Huntingdon?”

“Please keep your voice low.” Marisa took a glass of champagne from the refreshment table and glanced around, making certain they couldn’t be overheard. The groups standing nearby all appeared engaged in their own conversations. “If the man I overheard is here, I intend to do everything I can to find him.”

Beatrice sipped her lemonade. “I was just speaking with Kitty Teasdale about what you heard. We simply cannot imagine anyone who might want to murder Lord Huntingdon.”

“You spoke to Kitty about what I overheard in the maze?”

“Yes. And she agrees with me. They must have meant something other than murder. Or perhaps they meant the Duke. We could think of several reasons someone might want to murder the Duke. And Amelia Gardener also agreed with us.”

Marisa stared at her niece. “How many people have you told about this?”

“Kitty and Amelia. And of course I mentioned it to Clara Maitland. Oh, and Rebecca Northum. Just my closest friends.” Beatrice fixed Marisa in a look meant to dismiss her aunt’s concerns. “And no one believes the men you overheard were serious.”

Marisa had an uneasy feeling about a few of the young ladies in Beatrice’s circle. “I hope you asked your friends to be discreet. I don’t wish anyone to know about what I overheard.”

“My friends are hardly gossips.”

The sound of conversation and laughter mingled with the music. Marisa wondered how many people were already discussing the gossip littered about by careless young girls. She suspected half the room would know about the incident in the maze before the evening was over. “Please refrain from speaking of this matter.”

“I do believe you are making more of this than need be.” Beatrice sipped her lemonade and licked the moisture from her lips. “If anyone is thinking about murder, everyone is convinced they must have been speaking of Marlow.”

“The men I overheard said Huntingdon not Marlow. I hope I’m mistaken. I hope this is all a horrible misunderstanding on my part. Still, I feel I must do all I can to make certain Huntingdon is safe. Otherwise, if something should happen to him I would always feel responsible in some way.”

“Aunt Marisa, this is really none of your concern. Lord Huntingdon can certainly take care of himself. He is a war hero. He charged straight into French artillery to save his regiment.”

“This is not battle. I believe a person planning a murder wouldn’t come directly at his target. I must do what I can to help.”

“I think you should reconsider.” Beatrice turned her attention to the dance floor. “Interesting. Aunt Cecilia is dancing with Mr. Rawlinson again.”

Marisa glanced in the direction of Beatrice’s stare and watched as Cecilia moved through the intricate steps of a quadrille with a tall, fair haired man. Cecilia was actually smiling.

Beatrice leaned toward her. “Have you heard the dreadful rumor?”

“What rumor?”

“Apparently it’s spreading all over London. Kitty just arrived from the Ripley party, and she told me it was circulating there as well.” Beatrice’s eyes sparkled with excitement. “It’s simply dreadful.”

The *ton* devoured gossip and rumors like hungry dragons inhaling hapless peasants. Although Marisa didn’t care to perpetuate any gossip, she admitted to some curiosity. “What have you heard?”

“Everyone is talking about—” Something behind Marisa snagged Beatrice’s attention. She stared, her eyes wide, her lips parted as though a ghost had just asked her to dance.

“Good evening, ladies.”

Marisa’s heart stopped at the sound of that deep masculine purr, only to start again in a headlong rush. After all of this time, she should be over this unfortunate affliction known as Clayton Trevelyan. Still, there was something elemental about him that drew her to him, as it always had. And to her utter chagrin, she suspected it always would.

She gathered her defenses, preparing herself for his indifference. He would bestow upon her a polite good evening then stride past her. Marisa molded her lips into a gracious smile. She certainly wouldn’t allow anyone to realize she was still hopelessly besotted with the man. People already considered her ridiculous for parading about the Season like a young girl. She certainly wouldn’t wear her heart pinned to her sleeve.

Marisa turned to find Clayton no more than two feet away. The look in his eyes startled her. That look was hardly polite. The cool detachment she had seen yesterday in those grey-green depths had solidified into ice.

“I was hoping you would be here,” Clayton said.

Marisa stared at him, her breath suspended. “You were hoping to see me?”

He leaned toward her, his voice dropping to a husky whisper. “Meet me on the terrace in five minutes. I need to speak with you.” With those few words he proceeded to stride past her, apparently unaware of the storm of emotion he had unleashed inside her.

Marisa stared after him, thoughts whirling through her befuddled brain like dried leaves in a storm. He moved with such utter assurance, elegant, powerful without a trace of the charming, distracted, shy young man she had known. His years in the army had altered him, transformed every bit of softness in him to cold, glittering steel.

There was something altogether dangerous about him now. A warrior forged in battle. A man who had faced death and lived to remember its every feature. Although women cast him admiring glances as he strode past them, he returned nothing more than a polite smile, as though he held the entire world at a distance. Was there any trace of the boy she had loved in this dangerous man?

“Aunt Marisa, I don’t think it would be wise to meet with Lord Huntingdon.”

Marisa managed a smile. “I shall be on the terrace, Trice. I hardly think I need a chaperon. I do admit I’m curious about what he wants to speak to me about. I wonder if he has decided there might be something more to what I overheard than he originally thought. Perhaps Marlow was able to convince him to take the threat seriously.”

Beatrice moistened her lips. “Perhaps I should accompany you when you meet him.”

“I shall be fine.” Marisa was in no mood for Beatrice’s slavish devotion to propriety.

She left her niece before Beatrice could launch into another lecture about her lack of decorum. Marisa was well aware of her flaws. Over the years she had tried her best to correct them, but she had come to the conclusion she would simply have to live with her imperfections.

A cool breeze faint with the warring scents of burning coal and evergreen brushed Marisa’s face as she stepped from the crowded ballroom. The ever present stench in the air was just one of the reasons she had always preferred the country over Town.

A few guests had ventured onto the terrace. Most of them hovered in the light spilling from the three sets of open doors. A few couples were scattered in the shadows, stretching the bounds of propriety. Marisa crossed the length of the terrace until she reached the steps leading down into the gardens at one end. She rested her hands on the stone balustrade, drew in her breath and tried to calm the hammering of her heart. What did Clay want to discuss with her?

At the soft sound of footsteps on stone, she turned prepared to face him. Instead of Clayton, she found Mr. Desmond Wetherstone walking toward her. Marisa cringed inwardly. For the past three Seasons, Wetherstone had proven to be one of her most determined suitors. Although he wasn’t altogether unattractive, she knew Wetherstone found her wealth and social connections the true reason for his interest in her.

Just above medium height, with blonde hair and brown eyes, Wetherstone considered himself one of the leading arbiters of fashion. He smiled as he drew near, the expression in his eyes remaining cold and calculating. “I must say you are looking radiant this evening. You cast all the young chits in the shade.”

Marisa stepped back as he drew near. She poked the tip of her fan against his chest to keep him at a proper distance when he tried to move closer. “Are you not disappointing some young lady by missing this dance, Mr. Wetherstone? I would think there is still time to find a partner if you hurried back into the ballroom. I suggest you do so.”

His nostrils flared delicately, as though he suddenly caught a whiff of something he found distasteful. “I’m delighted to see you haven’t donned a cap this year. I’m certain many thought you might.”

Marisa stiffened at the finely veiled insult. She thought of the parcel she had received yesterday. Perhaps the cap had been sent by a man hoping to prompt her into accepting a proposal out of desperation. “There are so many lovely young ladies here this evening. It would prove a pity for you to waste your energy with a lady past the first blush of youth.”

“You know my sentiments, my dear lady.” He smiled, thin lips pulling into a tight line, revealing uneven teeth. “If you would only accept me, I would be the happiest of men.”

“I’m afraid my decision has not altered, Mr. Wetherstone.”

“I would think carefully before you make your final decision, Lady Marisa. You will find as you grow older your choices will grow sparse. Most gentlemen are looking for far younger ladies for a bride.”

Marisa smiled. “I wouldn’t think of preventing you from choosing a much more suitable bride.”

“I wasn’t speaking for myself.” He gripped her arm, holding her when she tried to pull free. “You are incomparable in your beauty.”

“Mr. Wetherstone, take your hand off of my arm.”

He leaned toward her, holding her arm in a tight grip. “Perhaps one kiss would convince you to change your mind.”

Marisa poked the tip of her fan under his chin. “Mr. Wetherstone, if you don’t release me I shall be forced to hurt you. Take your hand off of me, sir.”

“Enjoying the party, Lady Marisa?”

At the sound of Clayton’s voice, Marisa glanced past Wetherstone and found him standing a short distance away. Pale light poured over him, revealing features set in a grim mask. Her breath froze in her throat. In that instant he looked every inch a man capable of killing with his bare hands.

“Huntingdon.” Wetherstone dropped his hand and stepped back from Marisa. “I didn’t hear you approach.”

“It would seem you are having some difficulty with your hearing this evening Wetherstone.” Clayton smiled, his gaze fixed on Wetherstone. “I heard Lady Marisa tell you to take your hand off of her arm and I was standing several feet away from you at the time.”

“Yes.” Wetherstone flicked his tongue over his lips, reminding Marisa of a lizard. “Well. Pardon me.”

Marisa rubbed her arm as Wetherstone scurried away from them. “I don’t trust that man.”

Clayton glared at her. “He is the type who would compromise you to force you into marriage.”

“He would try. I was about to kick him in the knee when you arrived.”

“Some men wouldn’t be so easily dissuaded. You should take more care in running about unattended.”

The last thing she intended to endure was a lecture from him on the impropriety of her behavior. “As I recall you asked me to meet you out here.”

Clayton’s lips flattened into a tight line. “Your propensity for running about without a chaperon is one of the things I wish to discuss with you.”

“I have learned to take care of myself. I’m no longer the naïve girl I was in my first Season.”

“As I recall you could always manage your legion of admirers. I can only imagine the gentlemen dangling after you this Season.”

She bristled at the condemnation in his tone. “Did you ask me to meet you out here so you could speak to me about my admirers?”