



DIANE
GASTON

INNOCENCE *in*

Regency
Society

Diane Gaston

**Innocence in Regency Society:
The Mysterious Miss M /
Chivalrous Captain, Rebel Mistress**

«HarperCollins»

Gaston D.

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Regency Society

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As a psychiatric social worker, **DIANE GASTON** spent years helping others create real-life happy endings. Now Diane crafts fictional ones, writing the kind of historical romance she's always loved to read. The youngest of three daughters of a US Army colonel, Diane moved frequently during her childhood, even living for a year in Japan. It continues to amaze her that her own son and daughter grew up in one house in Northern Virginia. Diane still lives in that house, with her husband and three very ordinary housecats. Visit Diane's website at <http://dianegaston.com>.

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Chivalrous Captain, Rebel Mistress
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Diane Gaston

For Helen and Julie, who have been with me in this writing venture from the very beginning, and Virginia, who made our circle complete.

Chapter One

London, September 1812

Madeleine positioned herself on the couch, adjusting the fine white muslin of her gown and placing her gloved hands demurely in her lap. The light from the branch of candles, arranged to cast a soft glow upon her skin, enhanced the image she was bid to make. Her throat tightened, and her skin crawled from the last man's attentions.

This wicked life. How she detested it.

She checked the blue-feathered mask, artfully fashioned to disguise her identity without obscuring her youthful complexion or the untouched pink of her full lips. 'The Mysterious Miss M' could be any girl in the first blush of womanhood. It was Farley's contrivance that she appear so, and the men who frequented his elite London gaming hell bet deep to win the fantasy of seducing her. Escape might be out of the question, but at least the mask hid her face and her shame.

Unable to remain still, Madeleine stepped over to the bed, discreetly tucked into the corner and covered in lace-trimmed white-and-lavender linens like some virginal shrine. She perched on the edge of it and swung her legs back and forth, wondering how much time was left before the next gentleman had his turn. Not long, she surmised. She had taken more care in the necessary toilette than usual, thoroughly washing away the memory of that odious creature who had not departed too soon for her taste.

Male laughter, deep and raucous, sounded in the next room. Stupid creatures, seated around tables, as deep in their cards as in their cups, just waiting for Lord Farley to make away with their fortunes. The girls who ran the tables, tonight dressed as she was, like ingenues at Almack's, were meant to tantalise, but, for a select few, the Mysterious Miss M was the real prize.

Farley would not allow his prize to flee. She had learned that lesson swiftly enough. No matter. There was nowhere for her to go.

Voices sounded outside the room, and she blinked away the memory of how Farley had doomed her to her fate, or, more precisely, how she had doomed herself.

The next man, thankfully the last, would appear soon, and she had best be ready. She checked her hair, fingering the dark curls fashioned in the latest style to frame her face, a pale pink silk ribbon threaded through them.

Something thudded against the door. Madeleine hopped off the bed and hurried to her place on the couch. In staggered a tall figure, silhouetted against the brighter light of the gaming room. He stood a moment with his hand to his brow.

A soldier. He wore the red coat of a British uniform, festooned with blue facings and looped gold lace, unbuttoned to reveal the white linen of his shirt. If only she were a soldier. She would battle her way out of this place. She would be in the cavalry and gallop away at breakneck speed. How lovely that would be.

The soldier, who looked not more than five years older than she, swayed as he swung shut the door. Lord Farley's generous supply of brandy, no doubt.

Madeleine sighed. He might be foxed, but at least he was not fat. With any luck, his mouth would not be foul. She hated a putrid-smelling mouth. With all his lean muscle, he looked as a soldier should, strong and powerful.

'Good God!' he exclaimed, almost tripping mid-stride as he caught sight of her.

'I am afraid I am not He, my lord,' she retorted. The candles illuminated a handsome face, grinning with such good humour she could scarcely keep from grinning back.

'Yes, of course not.' His green eyes twinkled. 'And fortuitous for me that you are not, Miss...?'

'Miss M.' A charmer. She had met charmers before. The charm wore thin after they took what they wished from her.

“‘The Mysterious Miss M”, I recall now.’ He flopped down on the couch next to her. ‘I beg your forgiveness. You quite startled me. I had not expected you to actually look like a young lady.’

‘I am a young lady,’ she said, playing her part.

‘Indeed,’ he agreed, masculine approval shining in his sea-green eyes and a dimple creasing his left cheek. ‘I swear you are the vision of one. England does offer the finest ladies. I find I must apologise for this humble uniform.’

He presented her with his boot-covered foot and winked at her while she tugged on it. Though properly polished, her fingers felt the leather’s scratches and scrapes. From the battlefield? she wondered. When his foot finally gave up the boot, he nearly fell off the couch. She rolled her eyes.

He laughed. ‘Have I impressed you with my finesse, Miss M?’

‘Indeed, my lord. I cannot recall when I have been so entertained.’

He chuckled softly and swung around, bringing his face close to hers, his expression more full of mischief than lust. ‘And I thought you were here to entertain me.’

She felt a smile tickling the corner of her mouth. He placed his finger on her lip and traced the edge. His eyes filled with a wistful expression that surprised her. A heat she was not quite prepared to feel made her wish to fan herself. As she wiped the disturbing touch from her mouth with her tongue, he took a swift intake of breath and gazed into her eyes so intensely that she lowered them.

He was like the fantasy she conjured up in her loneliest hours. A knight on a huge white stallion, who faced the evil lord in the joust, winning her away. Or the pirate who fought the blackguard and sailed her away in a ship with a dozen sails. He was the soldier, riding in with sabre flashing, to rid her of Farley and keep her safe forever.

Such nonsense. He was none of these, for all the splendour of his uniform, dark, curling hair and sun-darkened skin. He certainly looked the part, though, with his eyes wondrously expressive and a face lean, as if honed by battle.

Once Farley had been a fantasy, when she’d dreamed he was taking her to a marriage bed instead of the one in this room.

The soldier shrugged off his coat, and his loose linen shirt revealed a peek of black chest hair. Madeleine’s eyes fixed on the wiry patch and her fingers itched to discover how it would feel.

As if it would feel any different than the other lust-filled men who forced themselves so hard against her that she pushed on their chests to give herself room for breath. She placed a hand on her breast. What fancy had captured her to give way to such thoughts?

He grinned impishly at her again, the dimple deepening in his cheek. ‘You are a vision, Miss M. Like England herself, beautiful to behold. Nothing mysterious about it. In fact, I shall call you Miss England.’

‘Do not be so foolish, sir. The fabric of my dress is Indian. The design is French and the style Roman. My mask is Venetian. My pearls are Oriental. I think my shoes are from Spain. There is nothing of England here.’

His finger traced the edge of the demure bodice of her dress where the fullness of her breasts was only hinted. He hooked his finger under the material and pulled it away from her skin, allowing a soft touch of what was underneath.

‘I suspect,’ he murmured, stroking her skin and gazing into her eyes, ‘underneath you are pure England.’

‘Not pure, my lord,’ she whispered as his fingers did lovely things to her soft skin. ‘Not pure at all.’

He slowly leaned closer so that she could feel his breath on her lips. With a gentleness she did not know existed, he placed his lips on hers and lingered there, moving so softly, she was only half-aware of him urging her mouth open and tickling the moist inside with his tongue.

She moaned and positioned herself closer to him. Her arms twined around his neck and her fingers played with the curls on his head. He tasted of brandy, but she decided she might like brandy the next time she was compelled to drink it.

He urged her down on the couch, covering his body with hers. The hard bulge of his arousal pressed against her. To her surprise, it pleased her.

Only once before had a man's arousal not filled her with revulsion. That day in the country when her father's house-guest, the Lord Farley her older sisters prosed on about, met her out riding and showed her what happens between a man and a reckless, unchaperoned fifteen-year-old girl. She had thought it a splendid joke to be the first of her sisters kissed by a man, but, all too easily, that kiss had led to delights she had not imagined.

The soldier's muscles were firm beneath his grey wool trousers. His mouth played lightly on her cheek, and Madeleine's long-suppressed desire tugged at her again. She must not allow herself the weakness. She must control her sensibilities.

His kisses trailed down the sensitive skin of her neck, and she said her rehearsed lines: 'Shall we go to the bed, my lord?'

Immediately he rose, grinning his dimpled grin. 'Whatever you command, my lady.'

He gallantly extended his hand to assist her up. His grasp was firm and warm, even through her lavender-kid glove. As she led him to the bed, he kept hold of her hand, the gesture unexpectedly setting off a storm of yearning inside her.

Vowing to get her feelings under control, Madeleine continued her duties, turning back the covers on the bed and facing the soldier. She slowly pulled off her gloves, one finger at a time. Her fingers free, she unlaced his shirt, caressing his warm bare skin as she pushed it off his shoulders. When she unfastened his trousers, the bulge therein attested to the success of her endeavours. She tried not to watch his green eyes darken with passion.

A guttural sound emerged from his throat. Madeleine collected herself and proceeded with the task she was bid to perform. This was the moment for him to pounce on her. She must temper his lust, so that her dress not become ripped from his impatience.

Even completely free of his clothes, he did not pounce. Instead, he simply gazed at her. All the unwanted cravings of her body rushed back as she gazed at him in return. Usually she avoided a view of the men who bared themselves before her. When Farley first seduced her, she had been too shy to look, but her gaze freely drank in this soldier's body. He was more beautiful than the drawings of Greek statues in her father's books. Her eyes widened with surprise at the pleasure of seeing him.

'Good God, Miss England,' he exclaimed. He moved toward her. With gentle hands on her shoulders, he turned her around and fumbled with the laces of her dress, his progress painfully slow.

He chuckled. 'I am woefully out of practice.'

With a resolute purse of her lips, Madeleine spun back to face him and made quick work of the laces. The dress fell to the floor. She tackled the corset next. When she let her shift drop from her body, his gaze was as rapt as hers had been, and her resolve to simply perform her task fled.

His eyes met hers. 'I feel home at last.'

He ran his hand over her breasts, his fingers barely skimming the soft flesh. Her breasts ached. How could they ache? He'd barely touched them.

'Wh—where have you been?' She would distract herself. These feelings were too disturbing. 'In the Peninsula?'

'Last at Maguilla.' His manner turned solemn and his sparkling eyes lost lustre.

Maguilla. So exotic a name, like a magic kingdom far away. But what had happened there to cause his change in mood?

Sadness lingered in his eyes, but he smiled. 'I have been too long at battle and not long enough at home to have seen what I most have missed.'

'I do not understand you, my lord.' She chewed on her lip. 'What have you most missed?'

His gaze travelled up and down the length of her. ‘England,’ he said in a reverent voice. ‘Every hill, curve, and thicket. All lush beauty and honest comfort.’

Madeleine felt herself blush. She stilled the impulse to cover her most female parts. ‘Well,’ she said, ‘shall we proceed, my lord?’

Quickly she climbed on the bed, her mouth set in a determined line. He followed her, more slowly than she would have guessed. That he was not so eager to slake his desire unsettled her, but not so much as her own yearning. When he climbed in the bed and positioned himself over her, she nearly burst with excitement. It felt too much like what had brought her to ruin, but she wanted this soldier. Wanted him very much.

She stiffened and panic raced through her.

He halted immediately, searching her face. ‘What is wrong?’

Her heart pounded. ‘Nothing. Nothing is wrong.’

He cocked his head sceptically. ‘You are frightened. I do not understand. What frightened you? Did I hurt you?’ He shifted to lie beside her.

She avoided the puzzled look in his eye. ‘No, you did not hurt me, my lord. I am not frightened. You may proceed.’

His hand grasped her chin and brought her face closer. ‘I’ll not proceed, as you say, until you explain.’

She could not explain what she did not understand. Even when Farley had seduced her and her body responded so wantonly, she had not felt like this. So...so excited and breathless.

Was this what young women felt when they loved the man they bedded? Was this a feeling she could never have or deserve?

A tear trickled down her cheek. As it appeared from beneath her mask, he wiped it away with his finger. ‘There now,’ he murmured, stroking her cheek. ‘No need to cry.’

‘It is of no consequence,’ she said, stifling a sob, furious at her tears. Farley would be even angrier, if he knew. Weeping was not in the carefully fashioned script. ‘Please don’t tell Lord Farley about this.’

‘Now, now.’ He sat up and settled her in front of him, wrapping his arms around her. ‘Why would I ever do that? Come. Tell Devlin what troubles you.’

‘Devlin?’ His arms felt like a warm blanket around her. She wished she could remain cosseted within them and never, ever leave.

‘That’s my name. Lieutenant Devlin Steele of the First Royal Dragoons. Youngest brother of the very honourable Marquess of Heronvale. At your service, Miss England.’ He cuddled her closer to him. ‘Tell me what is wrong.’

She released a deep, shuddering breath. ‘Sometimes...sometimes I wish to be what I appear, not what I am.’ The tears came in earnest now, soaking the feathers of her mask.

If only she had not gone riding that fateful day. If only Farley had not seen her scandalous attire, her brother’s old clothes already too small for her. If only she had known that kissing a man could lead to so much more.

She fingered the damp feathers of her mask, hoping they would dry without losing shape or she would be punished.

‘Shh, now, it will be all right,’ he whispered.

No, nothing would ever be all right again.

The lieutenant held her and rocked her and murmured comforting words into her ear. It was a long cry, longer than any she had allowed herself since the night she’d learned Farley had other plans for her besides marriage.

Soon enough, though, she recovered. She pulled away from him and turned so he could not see her face as she removed the mask to wipe her eyes with the linen sheet. When she turned back her mask was in place.

‘Now have you finished, little watering pot?’ he asked, his lovely green eyes the kindest she had ever seen.

She nodded.

‘Silly goose.’ He tapped her on the nose and slid off the bed to grope on the floor for his clothes. Still unsteady, he stumbled and bumped against the bedpost.

‘What are you doing?’ she asked.

He laughed softly. ‘Getting dressed. Do not worry, miss, I will forgo your favours tonight.’ He cast her a long glance, a woeful expression on his face. ‘Though it may be more difficult than piquet duty in freezing rain.’

‘No, you mustn’t.’ She pulled him back, trying to urge him back on top of her. ‘It would not suit. I am expected to perform.’

‘No, sweet Miss England. You have performed enough tonight.’ He stood again.

Madeleine stared at him, trying not to be transfixed by the flexing of his well-defined muscles as he groped for his trousers. She could not bear it if he should leave so soon.

He turned that mischievous grin upon her, his dimple emerging. ‘We must, of course, give a show for the others in the next room. Create proper noise. Make the poor buggers envious.’

She giggled.

‘Not laughter. Passion. Like this.’ He let out a loud moan. ‘More! More! More!’

‘Yes! Yes! Yes!’ she returned. They both burst out laughing, holding their mouths to keep it silent.

He collapsed on the bed. ‘Stop. It hurts to laugh.’ He grabbed his side. ‘Ow.’

She pulled his hand away. To the side of his abdomen there was a scar, jagged and still pink from recent healing.

‘You were injured at...at...?’ She traced the scar with her finger.

‘At Maguilla? As you would say, it is of no consequence.’ He smiled, but without joy. ‘We chased a regiment of French cavalry until the tide was turned and their reserves chased us. I made a foolish attempt to rally the men. A Frenchman met me with a lance instead. The wound is healed now. In two days’ time I return to my regiment.’

‘Back to the war?’

‘Of course. It is a soldier’s duty.’

Two days and he would return to war. He could be injured again. He could lose his life. Never again see his precious England. And, if she knew Farley, Devlin Steele would also return to war penniless.

‘Lieutenant?’

‘You must call me Devlin.’

She waved her hand dismissively. ‘Devlin, then. Have you won at cards tonight? I mean, in addition to winning me?’

He laughed. ‘Will you be in search of my money next?’

This offended. She had principles, after all. ‘I want none of your money, but you must refuse to play further. Make some excuse.’

‘Whatever for?’

‘The game is not honest.’

The silly men who lost fortunes to Farley while trying to win a second chance with her never comprehended. No one won her twice in a night.

‘The devil,’ he mumbled. ‘I never thought to inquire of Farley’s reputation. I should have known better. I shall make my excuses to him. I am indebted to you. You are quite a lady.’

‘Don’t elevate me, sir. I am just as I seem.’

He laughed. 'You seem quite like the misses in the marriage mart. A young lady of quality.' He smiled. His eyes turned kind and his voice tender. 'Indeed, that is what you are. A young lady of quality.'

Her face grew hot with shame. 'No.'

He struggled to get into his trousers, hopping on one foot and making no progress.

She did not wish him to leave. 'Lieutenant?'

'Devlin, remember?'

'Devlin. Will England win the war?'

He momentarily ceased his struggle. 'Without a doubt. It is nearly done, I think.'

'Wellington will see to it, will he not? And you soldiers who fight the battles with him?'

'Worry not, little miss.' He ran his finger over her brow. 'England will endure.'

Madeleine reached out and placed her hand over his scar.

'Lieutenant?'

'Yes?' He had become still, too, looking directly into her eyes.

'I wish to make love to you.' She slid her fingers up his chest.

'Miss England, it is not necessary.'

She reached behind her head and untied her mask. With trembling fingers, she removed it. His eyes darkened.

She moved closer. 'I will make love to you. It will be my gift, because you must return to battle.' With one hand stroking his hair, the other moved downward. Farley had taught her where to touch to arouse. This time, with Lieutenant Devlin Steele of the First Royal Dragoons, it gave her pleasure.

He moaned, softer this time. She clasped her hand behind his head and brought him uncomplaining to her lips. Urging him atop her, she gasped as the firmness of his body bore down on her. Her heart beat faster. She would truly make love to this soldier, this kind man who had been willing to comfort her.

He eased himself inside her with exquisite gentleness, and what typically caused her to deaden all emotion gave unexpected delight. She thrilled to the feel of him filling her, revelling in each stroke, each scrape of his chest against hers, each breath on her face. The only sound she heard was the clap of their bodies coming together and their panting breath. She matched his rhythm, stroke for stroke, press for press, and the sensations he created in her became urgent, spurring her on with each thrust. His pace quickened and her need grew. She would burst with pleasure, she was sure. She would shatter into a thousand sparkling shards. She would escape herself, this life she was forced to lead, the dismal future, in this brief space of time with Lieutenant Devlin Steele.

He collapsed on top of her, his need satisfied with hers. Sliding off, he lay facing her, his eyes half-closed, his skin aglow with a sheen of sweat. Madeleine let her gaze wander languidly over his face, memorising each feature, committing each curve and line to memory. She needed to remember him. She needed to dream of her Dragoon returning victorious from the war, coming to whisk her away. She would need for him to come to her tomorrow and the next day and the next.

The fantasy would comfort, though it would never come true.

'Sweet England,' he murmured. 'Thank you.'

She kissed him again, boldly giving him her tongue, tasting him. Brandy would never again taste so vile. It would be how he tasted. She inhaled his masculine scent, filling her lungs and memory with it, as his seed had filled her. She entwined her legs with his. He moved away from her kiss and grinned at her as she arched her pelvis to his.

'Ah, England, you shall be most difficult to leave.' As she placed her finger in the dimple on his cheek, he pressed his fingers into the soft flesh of her buttocks. She felt his passion flare back to life and she made a primitive sound deep in her throat.

As he entered her for the second time, Madeleine whispered. 'Lieutenant Devlin Steele. I shall remember you.'

Chapter Two

London, April 1816

Devlin Steele glanced up from the cards in his hand. The acrid smoke and dim light muted the gaudy red velvet of the gaming room. He reached for his glass and set it down again. The prodigious amount of brandy he had already consumed threatened to fog his brain.

His months back on English soil were as hazy as his present thinking. Snatches of memory. His brother, the imperious Marquess, rescuing him from the dirty makeshift hospital in Brussels. Days drifting in and out of consciousness at Heronvale, his sisters hovering around him, dispatched there to return him to health. Eventual recovery and a flight to London for a frenzy of dissipation meant to banish images of blood and horror and pain. Thus far, Devlin had managed to gamble and debauch away his quarter's entitlement. What capital he'd possessed had gone to money-lenders, but at present his pockets were flush, an unexpected surprise at Lord Farley's table.

'Your bet, Steele?' Farley's smooth voice now had an edge. His foot tapped the carpet.

Devlin stared at his cards, blinking to focus on the hearts and spades and diamonds. He had avoided Farley's gaming hell until this night, preferring an honest game, but damned if the man had not sought him out at White's. Predictable, Devlin figured, after he'd been tossing blunt all over town. Ripe for fleecing, by all accounts. A perfect pigeon for Farley.

He smiled inwardly. Farley had not yet heard the River Tick was already seeping into Devlin's boots. All the fleece had been long shorn.

'I'll pass.' Devlin barely glanced at the man seated across from him, concentrating instead on keeping his wits about him. Knowing Farley dealt a dishonest hand gave Devlin a slight advantage, if he could but hold on to it.

The cards were too good, though. Farley must be seducing him with a run of luck. He bet cautiously, against the cards, and avoided losing the successive hands. Farley's brow furrowed.

Rumour had it that Farley had lost a fortune in bad investments. Moreover, Napoleon's exile to St Helena had brought an end to the lucrative smuggling business everyone knew he ran. Farley was mortgaged to the hilt, a situation to make a man desperate—and desperate men made mistakes. War had taught Devlin that.

Farley indeed became more reckless, and Devlin stacked his chips higher.

Farley dealt the next hand, and Devlin carefully watched his expression. The man could still be considered handsome, though hard living had etched lines at the corner of his mouth and eyes. With his thin elegant nose, hair once fair, now peppered with grey, he had the look of the aristocrat he was, though his family fortunes had been squandered by an ancestry of fools. Typical of society, Lord Farley might not be a welcome suitor to the daughters of the ton, but, in the world of gentlemen who enjoyed his brandy, his card tables, and the young woman whose favours he doled out to the select few, Farley was top o' the trees.

Farley's fingers tapped a nervous tattoo on the table. 'Steele, I believe I could allow you some time with our Miss M. She is delightful tonight. A Spanish maiden. Perhaps she will remind you of your service in Spain.'

Devlin peered over the fan of cards in his hand. 'I have no wish to be reminded of Spain.'

He placed his cards on the table, and Farley blanched, pushing another stack of chips to Devlin's side.

The man plastered on a smile, but a nervous twitch had commenced under his right eye. 'I think you might recollect you won a time with Miss M once before. I assure you, she remains in good figure and has added to the delights she may offer.'

Devlin remembered her. Indeed, memory of her lovely face, so pale against her dark hair, had often warmed lonely nights as the British waited for Napoleon's army to attack. Her spirit and

sensibility had intrigued him more than young ladies in drawing rooms could do. Not that he had mixed in society to any great degree. Good God, he'd never even set foot in Almack's.

Devlin smiled at his host. 'I'm sure I'd be delighted to renew my acquaintance, sir. Perhaps after a hand or two.'

How long ago had he shared that memorable space of time with her? Three years and more? Just after Maguilla. What had her life been like under the thumb of this man?

Farley's brow broke out in beads of sweat. Devlin suppressed his smile. The man was in trouble. Throwing caution to the wind, Devlin made a hearty bet. The tic in Farley's eye quickened.

The cards were called, and the man on Devlin's right let out a whoop. So intent on besting Farley, Devlin had forgotten the other player. As Devlin gave up half his stack of chips, he vowed not to continue such carelessness.

'Enough for me, gentlemen. I think I shall stop before Barnes here takes my whole stack.'

Barnes bellowed with laughter. 'I'd be pleased to do that, Steele.' He gathered his winnings, leaving Farley with a scattering of chips too small to stack.

'Another time,' Devlin said, standing.

'One more hand.' Farley's voice was thick and tense. 'Don't deny me the chance to recoup, Steele. One more hand is all I ask.'

It would hardly be civil to refuse. Devlin bowed slightly and sat back down. One more hand couldn't break him, though that last loss had hurt a bit. Farley would have been wiser to quit. The man had lost all card sense. Devlin doubted he could even cheat effectively at this point. Barnes, too, was flush with his winning streak and eager to extend it.

Play was fierce. Devlin bet moderately, intent only on preserving his present winnings, but the cards came like magic. Was Farley setting him up, or had true luck shone upon him?

Caution be damned, he thought. Life's the real gamble. Devlin bet deep.

And won.

Barnes good-naturedly laughed off his losses, still ahead with his one spectacular hand. Farley slumped back in his chair, his face drained of all colour.

'You will accept my vowel, sir?' Farley's question did not demand an answer.

'But of course,' Devlin replied amiably.

As Farley wrote out his vowel, Devlin gazed around the room, into the dark recesses where Farley's girls, looking like Spanish tarts, ran the tables.

'Shall I make Miss M available to you?' Farley asked, his voice flat.

Devlin considered, sweeping his gaze over the too-opulent room. Had this place truly impressed him three years ago with its wainscoting and brocades? Now it appeared as false as glory.

Perhaps it would be preferable to seek the relative silence of the street and preserve The Mysterious Miss M as a memory.

A shout came from outside the parlour. The door opened and a burly man dragged in a girl who was beating at his chest and kicking his legs in protest. She wore a mask.

'Lord Farley,' the huge man said, 'she's brawling again.' He dropped the girl at Farley's feet. Her pale delicate fingers grabbed the edge of the table to pull herself up. She lifted her head regally and smoothed the skirt of her red silk dress. Black sensuous curls tumbled to her shoulders in a tangled mass. The lace mantilla had slipped off and hung on one of her shoulders.

'I have no patience for this,' Farley growled. 'What now?'

'She refused a patron.' The man tossed her a scathing look. 'She bit him in... a most unfortunate place.'

The girl faced Farley with her chin held high, her face half-covered by a red leather mask. 'I warned you I would do so.'

Farley shot out of his chair and with a loud clap struck his open hand against her cheek.

‘The devil!’ Devlin sprang from his seat to catch her before she hit the floor. Both her hands clutched her head, and Devlin supported her with an arm around her waist.

‘Farley, I must protest. That was most poorly done.’

‘I’ll thank you to stay out of my business, Steele,’ Farley snarled. ‘You have no say in the matter.’

‘If you strike her in front of me, I claim the right.’ Devlin spoke through clenched teeth. ‘You might hear her out.’

Farley rubbed his face. ‘I have treated her with more consideration than she deserves, and she still defies me. I’m done with her. You found her pleasing once. Take her in lieu of my debt.’

Devlin combed her hair away from her mask with his fingers. He would leave no woman to suffer such treatment. He leaned close to her ear. ‘What say you, Miss England?’

She blinked uncomprehendingly, her eyes unfocused. Suddenly her vision seemed to clear and she stared at him, the bright red imprint of Farley’s hand remaining on her cheek. She smiled faintly and flung her arms around his neck.

He gazed over the top of her head to Farley. ‘Your debt is settled, sir.’

A half-hour later Devlin paced the pavement in front of Farley’s establishment, cursing himself. In the space of a moment, he’d tossed his winnings away and incurred further expense. All for a lightskirt with whom he’d once spent a pleasant interval. He could almost hear the Marquess ring a peal over his head. ‘Brother, how many times must I caution you? Think before you act.’

Ah well, he could not very well leave his Miss England with Farley, could he? Perhaps she had some family. His winnings ought to be sufficient to send her wherever she wished to go.

At least the money bought him a little more time. Only two months left before his brother released his quarterly portion.

Two cloaked and hooded figures hurried from the alley. Devlin instinctively kept a watchful eye on them. In this neighbourhood one could easily be set upon and relieved of one’s winnings. Indeed, Farley might attempt to recoup his losses. The two shadowy figures came to a stop in front of him, one carrying a large portmanteau.

‘We are ready, my lord,’ the other one said, breathing hard.

Devlin peered at her. In the lamplight, her face was all but obscured by the hood, and she was wrapped entirely in her cloak, clutching some bundle beneath its folds. Still, he could not mistake his Miss England.

‘We?’ he asked, one eyebrow arching.

‘Sophie accompanies me. I will not leave her.’ The resolute tilt of the young miss’s head was the same defiant gesture she’d made to Farley. ‘Please, we must hurry.’

‘She is your maid?’ Mentally, Devlin doubled the expense facing him.

‘Yes, but more so she is my friend.’ She glanced about nervously. ‘Truly, haste is in order.’

‘Haste?’

‘We did not secure Lord Farley’s permission for Sophie to accompany me, but I’ll not leave her.’

The other woman was a wisp of a thing almost overwhelmed by the portmanteau. Devlin massaged his brow.

What the deuce. In for a penny, in for a pound. ‘Very well, Miss England.’ Devlin glanced around the street for a hack. ‘Shall I relieve you of your bundle?’

She shrank from him. ‘If you could take the portmanteau from Sophie, sir, I would be most grateful.’

‘Indeed. Sophie, allow me to carry that for you.’

The maid hesitated, backing away as if it were a precious burden unsafe to hand over. He nearly had to wrestle it from her grasp. The portmanteau weighed a ton. Surprising she had strength to lift it off the ground.

‘Where is your carriage, sir?’ Miss England asked.

Devlin laughed. ‘You mistake me for my brother, the Marquess. Perhaps we can find a hack hereabouts.’

‘Please, let us remove ourselves.’

He led the way, and the women fell in step behind him, like sari-clad females of India, keeping a respectful distance.

Perhaps he should have cast his lot with the East India Company. There were fortunes to be made, to be sure, but he had no wish for foreign shores. Not after Spain and Belgium—truth was, he had no idea what to do with his life.

Devlin glanced behind him, checking on his two shadows. The memory of his Miss England’s soft lips and bold tongue drifted into his mind.

A hack ambled to a stop at the end of the street, and Devlin quickened his step to arrange its hire. He assisted the women into the conveyance, and the driver stowed the portmanteau.

Devlin sat opposite his cloaked companions. ‘Where shall I instruct the driver to deliver you?’

The little maid huddled against Miss England’s shoulder. Miss England faced him, but he could barely make out her features. ‘We have nowhere to go,’ she murmured.

He rubbed his hands. ‘Is there no relation who might be persuaded to take you in?’ The coil he’d gotten himself into had just developed more tangles.

‘There is no one.’ She turned her head, but held it erect. ‘Leave us where you wish.’

Indeed, drop them into the street? They would be gobbled up in a trice. How long could he afford to put them up at some inn?

At that moment, the bundle in Miss England’s arms emitted a squeak. Two small arms poked out of the wrapping and wound themselves around her neck.

‘Deuce,’ Devlin said.

The cloak opened to reveal an equally small head with a mop of hair as dark as her own. The child cuddled against her chest, fast asleep.

‘This is my daughter, Lieutenant.’ Miss England faced him again and spoke in a trembling voice, both wary and defiant. ‘Linette...England.’

‘Good God.’

Miss England spoke again. ‘I do wish you would order the hackney somewhere away from this place. I care not where.’ She grasped the child more firmly. ‘Lord Farley might have a change of mind.’

Devlin instructed the driver to take them to his address. Where else could he take two women and a child when his brain was foggy with brandy and fatigue?

The passengers lapsed into silence. Miss England pointedly avoided conversation, and Devlin, angry at himself for his rash behaviour, clamped his mouth shut.

The thin light of dawn seeped through the London mist as the hack pulled up to a plain, unadorned building near St James’s Street. His rooms were at the edge of the unfashionable district where the rent was cheaper. It was an area best known for housing Cyprians of the ton and, therefore, acceptable for a gentleman.

His entourage spilled out into the street, the little maid grabbing the portmanteau before Devlin could reach it. He began to chuckle. To anyone passing by at this hour, the women would appear as two more fancy pieces under protection. As long as the bundle in Miss England’s arms remained covered, that is.

Devlin walked to his entrance halfway round to the back.

Wait until Bart saw what he had won at cards. The sergeant’s face when they came in the door would make this whole escapade worthwhile.

Devlin had once saved Bart’s life on the battlefield. Ever since, the older man made it his mission to take care of him. Primary among Bart’s self-imposed duties was tempering Devlin’s rash, impulsive nature—a task at which he was doomed to fail.

Live for the moment. As a creed, it was as good as any.

Hmmph, more like a curse, Devlin thought. That particular creed had gotten him sent down from a school or two, but, from the time his late father had purchased his colours, it had meant survival. Now, however, it meant he had the charge of two women and a child.

He glanced over his shoulder. The women were not following. They stood on the spot where the hackney had left them, looking as lost as waifs.

Devlin cursed himself. They presumed he would abandon them. When had he ever passed by a creature in need? In his youth, one of his impulsive habits had been collecting stray animals which he'd then had to conceal from his father.

He walked back to the women. Three more strays to add to his collection.

'This way, if you please.' He wrested the portmanteau from the maid again. 'My abode is humble, to be sure, but will have to do.'

Miss England stood her ground. 'You need not trouble yourself, Lieutenant.'

'Nonsense,' he replied. 'We shall contrive something. The streets are too dangerous for you.'

With halting steps she followed him through the narrow alley. Her maid crept close behind. The sky had brightened, showing signs of becoming a magnificent day.

Devlin knocked on the door and only a moment passed before it opened. 'Good morning, Bart,' he said in a cheerful manner. 'I trust you have not been up all night waiting for me.'

'Half the night is all, then I consigned you to Jericho and took to—' Pale brown eyes in a weathered face widened.

'I've brought guests.' Devlin smiled as he dragged in the portmanteau. Bart's astonished expression was as rewarding as he could have wished. 'Not guests, really. Charges, you might say.' He stepped aside to let the women enter. 'Bart, may I present my charges.' He swept his arm in a graceful gesture. 'Miss England and Sophie.'

The little maid stepped forward cautiously and curtsied.

Devlin tossed Bart an amused glance as he shrugged off his coat. 'Where are your manners, Bart? Take the lady's cloak.'

Bart, mouth open, did as he was bid.

Devlin turned to Miss England. 'Allow me to assist you.' He stepped behind her and unclasped the fastening under her chin, removing the garment.

As the cloak fell away, the child in Miss England's arms whimpered in her sleep.

'My God,' exclaimed Bart.

Devlin laughed. 'This is Miss England's daughter...um...'

'Linette.' Miss England turned to face Devlin, and he had his first good look at her.

His memory had not failed him. Her face was almost regal in its loveliness. Her skin shone like fine porcelain, except for finger-shaped splotches of blue. Her lips were the identical colour to a rose that had grown in his mother's garden. Her lush mahogany-coloured hair cascaded down her shoulders, the perfect frame for a perfect face. She met his appreciation with a bold gaze, her intelligent blue eyes reflecting both youthful innocence and knowledge far beyond her years.

Devlin's breath left his lungs.

'I...I do not know your true name...' he managed, feeling his throat tighten at the vision of so much beauty.

She paused, her eyes searching his face. 'My name is Madeleine.' She added a faint smile. 'Madeleine England.'

He remembered the feel of her bare skin next to his, the lushness of her full breasts, and the ecstasy of her passion. His eyes swept over her as his body came alive to her again.

The child sleeping against her shoulder brought him back to his senses, a tiny girl, a miniature of the mother, very much resembling the wax dolls on his sisters' old toy shelf. The child's feathery long lashes cast shadows on the rosy cheek that lay against Madeleine's shoulder.

What the deuce was he to do with the lot of them?

Bart broke out into guffaws of laughter. ‘Cast yourself into the briars again, have you, Dev?’

Madeleine lifted her chin, refusing to let it tremble in disappointment as she regarded the two men. At Farley’s, her vision blurred by Farley’s blow, she’d thought she dreamed Lieutenant Devlin Steele. Lord, she’d dreamed of him often enough. But when she’d blinked her eyes, it truly had been he.

She understood too well the look he’d given her a moment ago. It spoke of wanting to bed her. Foolish of her to forget this would be his motive for rescuing her. He could not be the brave and gallant dragoon of her fantasy. It had always been a silly fancy, after all, even if visions of him riding up on a tall stallion had comforted many a night.

Especially the nights Lord Farley came to share her bed.

The lieutenant ran his hand through his hair and replied to the other man’s remark. ‘I’ve not quite worked out what to do.’

She knew what he would do. He would cast them off as soon as he could. He must dislike her bringing Sophie and Linette. Perhaps if she’d come to him alone he’d have been content to keep her.

No matter. She would go nowhere without her daughter and her friend. They depended upon her.

She avoided looking at him. ‘We shall not trouble you, sir. It is light outside. I am sure we may be safely on our way.’ She reached for her cloak. ‘Come, Sophie.’

The slight figure was in mid-yawn, her lank yellow hair falling across her face. The other man reached out an arm for her as she staggered.

‘The lass is dead on her feet,’ he protested.

The lieutenant rubbed his brow, as Madeleine struggled with her cloak. The child squirmed and started to whimper. The cloak slipped to the floor. She tried to comfort Linette, swaying to and fro with her as she had done since her infancy.

‘Do not be foolish, Miss England.’ He picked up the cloak and tossed it out of her reach. ‘You confided you have nowhere to go.’

‘It is none of your concern.’ She attempted to pass by him to reach her cloak.

He stepped in her path and put his hand on her arm. ‘You will stay here.’

She wrenched her arm away. The child started to whimper.

‘You have made her cry,’ Madeleine said. Much easier to be angry at him than to worry about where she would go if they did walk out the door. What would happen to Linette out there in the streets?

‘I have made her cry?’ His eyebrows lifted. ‘Do you believe she will fare better if I allow you to leave? Do you have money enough to take care of her?’

She could not meet his eye.

He gently took her chin in his hand and made her look at him. ‘You do not have money enough even for a hackney coach, do you?’

Her little girl stopped crying and stared with wide eyes at the man. ‘Coach?’ the child said.

Madeleine clucked at Linette, taking advantage of the opportunity to turn her back on Devlin. Inside panic reigned. Where would they go? Not back to Farley. Never back to Farley, but where? ‘I do not need your concern.’

He marched around to face her again, and his voice became quieter. ‘I beg to differ with you. If you will recall, it was I who intervened when Farley struck you.’ He reached toward her cheek.

She shrugged him away, refusing to let him touch her. ‘What does that signify? It is not the first time he has hit me.’

His hand remained poised in the air, his expression conveying acute sympathy. She should not allow herself to believe he truly cared, no matter how much the fantasy of that very thing had sustained her these few years.

The child squirmed in her arms and pulled away to grasp his fingers. The child giggled. Devlin stepped closer, and the tiny girl tugged on his neckcloth. This time when he touched Madeleine's bruised cheek, she did not draw away. Could not draw away. Speech became impossible.

'He will not hurt you again,' he murmured.

He became the hero of her daydreams again. How could she believe in him? Other young men had vowed to place her under their protection. They never returned, or, if they did return, never spoke such a promise again. Farley had seen to it. Why had Farley allowed this man to take her? Was it some sort of trick?

She glanced at her lieutenant. His eyes were warm and full of a resolve she would at least pretend was real. His face again became the one in her weary daydreams, conjured up after her toils were done and she was free to seek her bed alone. He always smiled at her in her dreams, his dimple winking at her.

Now his manly face filled her with excitement. The memory of his gentle kiss and peace-shattering lovemaking returned and agitated her. It was acceptable to dream and remember, but to let herself feel again? To hope? No, her only hope was to contrive to support Linette and Sophie, two people she could depend upon because they needed her so.

Linette tore out the folds of Devlin's neckcloth as he leaned down. His lips came closer. Madeleine's heart thudded against her chest.

'I settled the lass in my cot.' The voice of Devlin's servant, Bart, broke in, full of indignation.

Devlin smiled at the man. 'In your cot, Bart? Quick work.'

'I'll harbour no insults, if you please.' This man did not speak as servant to master. 'If you've managed to get us any funds, I'll see about some food. Some milk for the wee one.'

Devlin marched over to the table and emptied his pockets. 'Good news. We shall eat well.'

Bart picked up a few coins and shoved the rest back to Devlin. 'See you try to hold on to these for a bit.' He reached for a coat on a hook and went out the door, closing it silently.

'He is your servant?' Madeleine asked, conscious of being alone with him once more.

As if reading her thoughts, Devlin regarded her with smouldering eyes. 'More than that, I suppose. We managed through Spain and Belgium together.'

'Belgium,' she murmured. After news of Waterloo, for days she had pored over the names of the dead, weeping in relief when she finally found him listed among the wounded.

No matter. Now that his servant had absented himself, her lieutenant would soon wish payment for her rescue.

Her heart pounded. She must not feel this excitement at being near him. She must expect him to be as selfish and capricious as other men. Madeleine adjusted her hold on Linette, who rubbed her eyes and flopped her head on Madeleine's shoulder again.

Devlin came near to her again. 'The child must be getting heavy for you. Come. It is time for bed.'

Devlin led her into his bedchamber, acutely aware of blood thundering through his veins. By God, she was more desirable than that first, magic time with her.

As she regarded the room with dismay, he saw it through her eyes. A smallish room, furnished with a tall double chest of drawers in a style long out of fashion and a large four-poster bed with faded curtains. His old trunk was tucked in the corner, clothing spilling out.

Her gaze rested on the bed. What might it be like to share that bed with her? To tangle with her in its sheets?

This would not do. She appeared as if she would collapse at any moment. The child was no infant, nearly three years old, he'd guess. A sturdy bundle, and Madeleine had not let go of her for nearly an hour.

'Where shall Linette sleep?' she asked nervously.

'In the bed, where else?'

She straightened, her defiant chin lifting. ‘My lord, I am prepared to repay you for your generosity, but I must insist on privacy for Linette. She must not be in the same room, let alone the same bed.’

He raised his eyebrows. Did she think him unmindful of the child? Did she think him so base as to take advantage of her?

‘And I’m loath to leave her alone in a strange place,’ she continued, her mouth set in firm determination.

He stared into her blue eyes and the breath left his lungs. He let his gaze travel down the length of her. Her red silk dress clung to her form and the weight of her daughter pulled its low neckline down lower. The attire was pure tart, but her bearing regal. The combination set his senses aflame, though he had no intention of acting upon them, ill timed as they were.

A smile not absent of regret spread across his face. ‘I meant for you and the child to share the bed. Did you think I meant otherwise?’

She blushed, bringing a most innocent pink to her cheeks, her eyes downcast. ‘You know very well what I thought.’

He stepped behind her and put his hands on her shoulders. The little girl’s curls tickled his fingers. For a moment he let his fingers caress Madeleine’s soft flesh. He held her against him, inhaling the scent of lavender in her hair. From behind her, he planted a chaste kiss on her cheek and gave her a push toward the bed.

‘Sleep well, Madeleine.’

Chapter Three

The damp chill seeped through Devlin's clothing. His twisted limbs would not move. Pain had settled into a constant ache, made worse with each breath, worse still by the rancid stench of blood. Of death. Moans of the dying filled the night. The sounds grew louder and louder, until they merged into one piercing wail. An agonised sound. The sound of fear and horror and pain.

Coming from his mouth.

He woke, his heart pounding, breath panting. His vision cleared, revealing faded red-brocade curtains made moderately brighter by sunlight. What were brocade curtains doing at Waterloo?

He sat up, his mind absorbing the round mahogany table in the corner with its decanter of port, the mantel holding one chipped porcelain vase. His back ached from contorting himself on the settee. It had been the dream. He hung his head between his knees until the disturbing images receded. Had he cried out in his sleep?

The wail again sounded in his ears, coming from the bedchamber this time, not from his own soul.

He leapt from the settee and flung open the door. Madeleine paced the room, clutching her little girl. The child cried and struggled in her arms. Madeleine's red dress was creased with wrinkles. That she'd not bothered to undress before sleeping moved him to compassion. How exhausted she must have been.

The child gave a loud, anguished cry, and Madeleine quickened her pace.

'What the devil is going on?'

She spun toward him, her youthful face pinched in worry. 'She is feverish.'

'She is ill?' Devlin's head throbbed from the previous night's excess of brandy.

'Yes. She coughs, too.' Her voice caught. 'I have never seen her so ill.'

'Good God,' Devlin said. 'We must do something.'

'I don't know what to do!'

Tears glistened in her eyes. The child's wailing continued unchecked. He had not bargained for a sick child.

'Bart!' he yelled, rushing back into the parlour. 'Bart! Where are you?'

Bart emerged from his room, Madeleine's small companion like a shadow behind him. The sergeant, his craggy eyebrows knitting together, protectively held her back. The gesture irritated Devlin. Did Bart think him dangerous to young females?

'What in thunder?' A scold was written on Bart's face.

'The child is sick. We must do something.' He stood in the middle of the room, doing nothing.

'The wee one is sick?' parroted Bart, standing just as paralysed.

'Linette!' Sophie rushed past Bart and ran to Madeleine, who had followed Devlin into the room. She frantically felt the child's forehead.

'She is burning up!' she exclaimed. 'Maddy, sit down. Let's loosen her clothes. Mr Bart, if you please, some cool water and some clean rags.'

'Clean rags?' Bart said, still immobile.

'Make haste!'

At Sophie's words, Bart sprang into action, drawing water from the pump and bringing it to the women, both fussing over the child. Finding clean rags was more of a challenge. He finally brought a stack of towels and bade them to cut them up, if necessary. Sophie dipped one towel in the water, wrung it out and placed it on the child's chest. Madeleine mopped the little girl's brow with another.

The child seemed to settle for a moment, but, before Devlin could relax, broke out in a spasm of coughing.

'Deuce,' said Devlin, barely audible and still rooted to the floor.

Madeleine flashed him an anxious look. 'I am attempting to quiet her, my lord.'

'I did not complain,' he protested.

Her eyes filled with tears. 'I am at a loss to do more.'

'I would be honoured to assist, if someone would instruct me.' No one heeded him.

Madeleine sniffed and patted Linette's head with the damp cloth.

Her friend regarded him with a wary expression. 'We could try to give her a drink of water.'

Before Devlin could move to the small alcove that served as the kitchen, Bart delivered Sophie a cup of water.

'Let me try to give her a sip,' Madeleine said.

Linette flailed her arms, jostling Madeleine, who spilled the water on her daughter and herself. Devlin walked to the cupboard, removed another cup, and placed in it a tiny bit of water. He handed this to Madeleine.

'Try a bit at a time,' he suggested.

She did not look up to acknowledge his act, but she was able to pour a small amount into the child's mouth. He took the empty cup and poured a bit more from the fuller one. Again the child accepted the drink.

Devlin was feeling rather proud of himself at having been so useful, when the child began another spell of coughing. Madeleine sat the little girl on her knees and leaned her over to pat her gently on the back.

The child promptly vomited the water all over Devlin's stockinged feet.

'Damn.'

Madeleine gasped. Sophie grabbed the wet towel and wiped his feet, kneeling like a slave girl. Bart glared at him as if he were somehow solely responsible for the child's ill health.

'Enough. Enough.' He stepped away from Sophie's ministrations. She burst into tears and ran from the room.

Bart glared at him. 'Now look what you've done. You've frightened the lass.' He rushed after her.

Devlin reached for his head. Bart, he supposed, would not be inclined to brew the remedy for his excess of brandy. The child wailed again.

The sound triggered memories. Voices of dying men. His knees trembled, and he feared them buckling underneath him. The dream of Waterloo assailed his waking moments. With it came the terror that had only been too real.

Clamping down on his panic, he rushed into his bedchamber and pulled fresh stockings from the chest. He shrugged into his coat, and retrieved his boots from the parlour where he'd left them. Without a word, for he could not guarantee his words would be coherent, he rushed out of the apartment, slamming the door behind him.

Madeleine flinched at the sound and held her coughing daughter against her shoulder, still patting gently. Well, good riddance to Lieutenant Devlin Steele, she told herself, battling the disillusionment of his abandoning her at such a time.

'Was that the door?' Bart asked, coming back into the room.

'He left,' she said, shrugging her shoulders.

'Hmmp.' The man pursed his lips.

Linette settled into a fitful sleep. Though her skin burned like a furnace, Madeleine could not let go of her.

The stocky man surveyed her. Not as tall as the lieutenant and a good ten years older, he seemed solid as a rock.

His gaze softened when lighting on Linette. 'Ma'am, would you and the lass be all right if I went out for a bit? I've a mind there are some things we may be needing.'

A rock that easily rolled away. She sighed inwardly. It was foolishness to hope for assistance from any man.

But Devlin had assisted her in the most consequential way. He had rescued her from Farley, when he need not have done. He was under no obligation to assist her further, however. After Linette's distress he would surely wish them speedily gone. Madeleine's lips set together in firm resolve. He would have to put up with all of them until Linette became well.

If Linette became well.

Her throat tightened. Her child meant everything to her. She'd risked Farley's wrath to give birth to Linette and to keep her. Her daughter was the only worthwhile part of her life.

Sophie appeared at her side. 'Mr Bart went out. Do you think the master will return soon?'

'Lieutenant Steele?' Madeleine would not call him master. 'I very much doubt it. I fear Linette's illness displeases him.'

'Is Linette better? She's quiet.' Sophie leaned over and brushed the child's dark curls with her fingers.

'She sleeps fitfully and is so very hot.' She dabbed at the child's face with the cool cloth.

Sophie wandered about the room aimlessly, and Madeleine watched her, needing some distraction. The room was comfortably fitted to double as parlour and dining area, but its once-fashionable furnishings showed signs of wear. The carpet had lost its nap in places, and the cushioned seats looked faded and worn. Had not Devlin said his brother was a marquess? Perhaps the family had more title than blunt. Not that it at all signified. It was far superior to Farley's richly done-up rooms.

Unbidden thoughts of home came, mahogany tables polished to mirror finish, sofas and armchairs covered in rich velvet. No threadbare furnishings there. She could see herself bounding through the rooms, her scolding governess in hot pursuit.

Linette stirred and Madeleine's attention immediately shifted to her. It never did any good to recall those days, in any event.

'Should I unpack our clothes, do you think?' Sophie asked.

Perhaps if they appeared settled in, they might delay an eventual departure. 'That would be good. I fear I cannot help you, though.'

'Oh, Maddy, do not trouble yourself. You have your hands full.' Her waiflike friend smiled at Linette. 'You ought to lie down with the babe.'

Her arms ached from holding Linette, and she had slept only a couple of hours before the child's cries woke her. 'I suppose you are right. I will bring her into the lieutenant's bed.'

She carried Linette to the bedchamber, placed her in the centre of the bed, and climbed in next to her. The sheets and pillow held Devlin's scent as they had the night before. She had dreamed of him walking toward her to a bed like this. He would gently brush the hair from her face and lean to kiss her. She had dreamed of this Devlin many times.

It took no more than a moment to fall exhausted into sleep.

The banging of the door woke her. She immediately felt for Linette's forehead, still too hot.

'Where the devil is she? I've brought a doctor.' Devlin's voice came from the other room. 'Where's the child? Has the fever broke? Deuce, I've been to Mayfair and back. Found the doctor three houses down.'

As the door of the bedchamber opened, Madeleine had a glimpse of Sophie skittering away. Devlin charged in, a short, spry figure behind him. He had mentioned a doctor. For Linette.

The doctor wore a kindly smile in a round countenance. His coat was shabby and the leather satchel he carried was battered and worn. He came directly to Linette. 'Is this our little patient? Here, let me have a look at her.'

Madeleine rose quickly and handed Linette over to him. He sat in a wooden chair and spoke softly to the child as he peeked into her mouth and examined her all over. Madeleine watched the doctor's expression for a clue as to his thoughts. She chewed on her lip. Devlin came to her side and put his arm around her. Needing his strength, she leaned against him.

Finally the doctor handed Linette back to her. 'She has a putrid throat. Nothing to signify under ordinary circumstances, but I cannot like her fever. How long has she suffered thus?'

'This...this morning,' Madeleine stammered. Devlin squeezed her closer.

The doctor smiled, kind crinkles at the corners of his eyes. 'Well, she seems a sturdy child. A little bleeding may suffice to throw off the fever.' He rummaged in his bag.

'Bleeding?' Madeleine said warily.

'Yes, just a little. Come hold her.'

Madeleine sat on the bed and placed Linette in her lap. The doctor opened a small container and, with long pointed tweezers, removed the ringed worm.

'Hold her arm, if you please.'

Devlin stood his ground, though every impulse shouted at him to flee. He recalled the doctors placing such creatures on his arm. The memory belonged to the time of delirium and pain, when he fancied the leeches would consume him alive. Madeleine sat so composed, so resolute in assisting the doctor.

His arms prickled with the sensation now being experienced by the little girl. She was too weak to struggle, as limp as his sister's dolls when they carried them about, as he had been those months ago in Brussels.

The child will feel better after the bleeding, he reminded himself. It had been so for him.

Finally the leech fell away, satiated, and the doctor placed the creature back in its container. He packed up his bag while Madeleine tucked Linette into the bed.

The doctor took Madeleine's hand. 'You have taken good care of her thus far. Try not to lose heart. I have some powders that may assist, as well.'

Madeleine nodded, looking unconsoled. The doctor frowned worriedly at Devlin and gestured for him to follow out of the room. Devlin escorted the doctor out.

When outside, the doctor paused, glancing worriedly back into the apartment. 'The child's fever is very high. Only time will tell if she will recover.' He handed Devlin a packet of powders and gave instruction how to use them. 'I shall return tomorrow to see how she fares.' He patted Devlin's shoulder.

Devlin pushed some coins into the man's palm. The doctor placed them in his pocket, not glancing at the amount. Smiling reassuringly, he took his leave.

Devlin returned to the bedchamber. Madeleine stood beside the bed where the child slept.

'He told you it is hopeless, did he not?' she said, rubbing her arms.

Devlin attempted a smile. 'Indeed, he said no such thing. He gave me the powders and told me how to mix them. He will return tomorrow to see how she fares.'

'She will not die?' Her voice trembled.

He walked over to her and gently brushed the hair off her face. 'She will recover. You are overwrought. Come, sit. I will wager you have not eaten.' He found a chair and brought it next to the bed. 'Where did your friend and Bart go?'

'Her name is Sophie, Lieutenant.' Her voice still shook.

'And mine is Devlin.' He tapped her nose with his finger. He gazed at the little girl. 'The child will sleep, I think.'

'Her name is Linette.'

Devlin touched a lock of the child's hair. 'I know.'

He heard the door open and went into the other room. Bart entered, carrying pieces of wood.

'What's all this?' Devlin asked.

Bart cleared his throat. 'I took the liberty of procuring a bed for the wee one. A rocking chair, as well. The poor babe needs a place to sleep.'

Devlin smiled at him. Bart was a practical man. 'Well done, my friend.' He had not thought of such a necessity.

Madeleine stood in the doorway. 'A bed for Linette?'

'Aye, miss. And a chair to rock her in.'

The look she gave Bart was almost worshipful. Devlin's skin grew hot. By God, he was jealous. Of Bart. He wanted Madeleine's gratitude all to himself.

'Set the bed up in our room for now, Bart,' he said and received not a glance from her.

Sophie peered out from the closet where Bart slept. 'Can I help you, Maddy? What would you have me do?'

'Prepare some food for Madeleine,' Devlin said. Sophie shrank from his voice, but scurried to do what she was told.

Devlin sat Madeleine at the small table and took a seat across from her. He poured a small glass of port. 'This will fortify you a bit.'

He sat so near to her, Madeleine again became aware of the scent that had surrounded her in his bed. The lines in his face were clearly visible and told of years spent on battlefields. Her heart gave a lurch. He was too much like her dreams.

'Drink,' he commanded, handing her the glass.

Madeleine obeyed. The sweet liquid warmed her throat, but Devlin's solicitude frightened her. The doctor must have given ominous news indeed.

He continued to speak to her in a kind voice. 'We will put the child into her bed as soon as Bart has put it together. Sophie can see to the linens. You must try to eat something, Madeleine.'

Sophie scurried from the scullery. Madeleine sipped her port, keenly aware of Devlin's eyes upon her.

Bart announced the bed to be ready, and Devlin accompanied her to the room. She placed Linette gently into the small wooden bed and carefully tucked the linens about her. The child settled, and Devlin took Madeleine's arm and urged her away.

When she returned to the table, Sophie put a plate in front of her with a fat slice of bread and cheese. Madeleine ate, because she did not know what else to do.

When darkness fell, Devlin lit the candles in the bedchamber to dispel the gloomy shadows that had crept into the room. The soft glow of the candlelight illuminated Madeleine, who looked vulnerable as she sat by Linette's bedside. She had barely moved from the little girl's side all day, though he could not fault her. Little Linette was an appealing child and it pained him to see her suffering.

Madeleine glanced at him. 'Do you go out this evening, my lord?'

He put his hands on the arms of her chair and leaned over her. 'My name is Devlin.'

'Very well. Devlin.' Her eyes drifted back to the child.

He pulled up a chair next to her. 'Now, how could I go out when our babe is ill?'

She gave him a sharp glance. 'You are not obligated to stay. I would not hold you.'

'Fustian,' he said.

She rocked gently. He wished he could convince her all would be well. He'd been trying to do so all day, but she did not believe in reassurances.

Devlin heard Bart's deep voice coming from the next room. He smiled to himself. The old sergeant was taken with that mouse of a female. It was amusing. Devlin always imagined Bart would shackle himself to some sturdy country girl to match the farm he used to dream of owning. To make a fool of himself over a wisp of a city chit amused Devlin no end.

'Devlin?' Madeleine's voice was barely more than a whisper.

'Yes?'

'I have never thanked you for...for the doctor and for...allowing us to stay.'

'Deuce, Madeleine. What do you take me for?' Tossing her out, indeed. 'Did you think I'd send you back to Farley?'

She twisted around to face him, alarm lighting her face. 'You would not!'

He stroked her cheek. 'Of course I would not.'

She turned back to Linette, but her hand went to the place he had touched. Devlin leaned back in his chair, balancing it on its back two legs. 'How the devil did you come to be at Farley's? You are too young, surely.'

She rocked at a faster pace. 'I am old enough.'

'Nonsense, you are hardly out of the classroom.'

She tossed him an insulted look. 'I am eighteen.'

'Eighteen!' he cried, unbalancing the chair and nearly pitching over. Linette stirred, whimpering.

'Shh.' Madeleine reached for the child, rubbing her back.

'Good God.' He lowered his voice. 'How old were you when you came to him?' He'd made the computation in his head, but could barely believe it. She'd been so young, and he'd made love to her. How could he have done so?

'I was fifteen.'

'Damnation!' So painfully young. He had left her there when she was younger than the silly chits making their come-out, the ones he thus far had successfully avoided. 'The man's a damned reprobate.' Devlin had bedded her, as well. What did that make him?

She gave him a sideways glance. 'You assume me the hapless victim, Devlin. Don't make me so good.'

'You did not join him willingly.' He would not believe it.

She continued her rhythmic rocking. 'Is this any of your concern, my lord?'

'Not a whit.' But that would not stop him. 'Why did you join that cheating lout, then?'

She sighed. 'This is a sordid story. Hardly of interest.'

'Of interest to me,' he persisted.

'Very well.' She paused to stroke Linette's hair. 'He seduced me. I was ruined. What else could I do?'

She made being ruined sound like getting a soiled spot on her gown. This was a rum story if ever he heard one. Farley was forty, if he was a day. Seducing a girl of her tender years—abominable. Devlin ought to have rescued her from him back then. Saved her from that abominable life.

She adjusted the blankets around the child, the candle behind her placing her profile in silhouette. His breath caught. She was a beauty. As fair as a cameo. As exotic, with her thick black curls, as a goddess from foreign shores. As skilled in the sheets as would fuel any man's dreams.

Her fingers gently touched the child's forehead. When she drew them away, they covered her face. Shame on him. Her child's life hung by a fragile thread, and he thought of bedding her.

'She will recover, Madeleine. Do not fear.'

She leaned back in the rocking chair and closed her eyes. Her silence stretched into the night, and Devlin felt guilty and useless. He watched her rock slowly back and forth in the chair. Back and forth. Back and forth.

'Devlin?' Her voice came as if from a great distance.

'Yes?'

'Do you believe God punishes sinners?'

Chapter Four

Devlin woke sharply, still sitting in the chair. The candles had burned down to stubs and the peek of dawn came through the windows. Madeleine cradled the child in her arms. The child was still.

‘My God, is she...?’ No, it was unthinkable.

‘She’s sleeping.’

Devlin’s heart started beating again.

Madeleine shuddered. ‘Her fever broke and she fell asleep. I thought I would lose her, Devlin. It is what I deserved.’

‘Nonsense.’ Weak with relief, he stretched his stiff limbs. ‘She is through the illness, then?’

She nodded, her cheeks wet with tears.

While she had kept her anxious vigil, he had fallen asleep. Damned if he was not a useless sot. He stood up and, with a tentative hand, stroked the child’s hair.

He kissed the mother on the forehead. ‘Now you can get some sleep, as well. To bed, Madeleine, the babe can lie with us.’

He urged her up by her elbow and put an arm around her waist as he escorted her to the bed.

She looked about to protest.

He grinned. ‘Now don’t get in a twist. I’m too tired to remove my clothes and so are you. We will be as proper as peas.’

She removed her slippers and laid Linette on the bed. Devlin’s boots had long been tossed into a corner, as had his coat and waistcoat. He turned down the covers, and she crawled in. When he took his place next to her, he tucked her against him and promptly fell back to sleep.

When Madeleine woke, she was alone in the bed.

Linette. Where was Linette? She scrambled out of the covers and ran to the door.

Opening it, she saw Devlin seated at the table, Linette on his lap. The child giggled as she pulled on Devlin’s nose. Two dark curly heads so close together.

Devlin turned his head to escape the assault on his nose. He spied Madeleine. ‘Good morning, sleepyhead.’

‘Deddy’s nose,’ cried Linette, pushing Devlin’s head back with two chubby hands on his cheeks. Devlin pretended to resist.

‘Would you like some nourishment, miss?’ asked Bart, pulling out a chair for her.

She glimpsed Sophie perched on a stool near the kitchen alcove, looking smaller and more childlike than ever. Sophie jumped down and disappeared into the scullery.

‘Our girl has made a remarkable recovery, wouldn’t you say, Maddy?’

Hearing Devlin say ‘our girl’ gave her heart a lurch. Nor did the familiarity of him calling her Maddy escape her notice.

‘She seems fit,’ she agreed.

‘Mama!’ Linette scrambled off Devlin’s lap and flung herself into Madeleine’s. ‘I got Deddy’s nose!’

‘I saw, sweetling.’ She kissed the top of Linette’s head and felt her forehead with her hand. It felt blessedly cool.

Bart brought a tray of tea things, followed by Sophie carrying a plate of biscuits. He set the tea service beside her and poured her a steaming cup. ‘Do you want some tea, Dev?’

Devlin nodded.

Linette pointed to the biscuits, ‘I want one.’

Madeleine placed a biscuit on a plate and lifted Linette on to the other chair to eat it.

‘Maddy, you’re a sight.’ Devlin blinked at her over his cup. ‘That awful dress.’

She glanced down at the crumpled red silk.

‘Would you like Bart to fill you a bath? We have a tub hereabouts, don’t we, Bart?’

‘I believe so,’ Bart responded.

Before Madeleine could think of what she wished to reply, Bart fetched the large tub, carrying it into the bedchamber while Sophie put on more water to boil. When they began to carry buckets to fill the tub, Madeleine offered to assist, but Devlin would not let her. Even Linette helped, carrying small pitchers of water, spilling more than made it into the tub. It felt all wrong to be so pampered.

When the bath was filled, Devlin brought her into the bedchamber. Bart and Sophie took charge of Linette, but Devlin remained. Madeleine began to understand.

Devlin closed the door and leaned against it. ‘Shall I play lady’s maid for you?’ His voice was velvet.

It was time for her to pay for his kindness. Farley had taught her how.

She cast Devlin a demure look under her lashes and strolled over to the bath. ‘As you wish, sir.’

He moved closer, as smooth a motion as a stalking cat. Presenting her back to him, she lifted the long tangled curls off her shoulders. His hands slid up the length of her back. Slowly he undid her laces, his fingers light and dextrous. She remembered him fumbling with her laces all those years before. Her body lapsed into a languid state. His hands slipped under her dress and ran over her skin like warm liquid.

The wrinkled red silk dress fluttered to the floor. Next came her shift. When she was fully naked, she knew he would wish to see. She turned to face him.

As she expected, his eyes feasted on her, darkening with arousal. She had learned to stand still for a man’s visual pleasure.

He took time to regard her, longer than she thought she could bear. His gaze disturbed her. Not precisely as the ogling from Farley’s clientele had done, but in an indefinable, unsettling way. His eyes finally reached her face.

‘You are lovely.’ The corner of his mouth turned up, and his dimple deepened.

The next move belonged to her. She stepped toward him and reached out her hand to caress his neck. She had not intended to kiss him, but he leaned down, and she had only to rise on tiptoe to reach his lips. He crushed her against him, standing wide-legged so she could feel his arousal pressing into her. For a moment she forgot her role and simply revelled in the strength of his muscles, the sweetness of his mouth, the feel of his hands pressing into her back, sliding down to hold her tightly against his groin. She did not realise how quickly she removed his shirt, how efficiently she freed him from his trousers, how she clung to him as he carried her to the bed.

‘Madeleine.’ His voice was a groan as he placed her on the bed and climbed atop her. His lips feathered her cheek and neck, soft, warm, and hungry. Her heart raced in excitement. His tongue circled the pink of her nipple, and all her senses sprang to life. She ached with wanting him.

She was spiralling out of control at the precise moment she ought to check herself. She had succumbed to the ecstasy of Devlin’s lovemaking once, but that interlude belonged to daydreams. She must shield herself, protect herself from feeling, just as she’d done when required to endure the attentions of other men. The Mysterious Miss M could not be hurt, or humiliated, or betrayed, because The Mysterious Miss M felt nothing at all.

The Devlin of her daydreams was not the same Devlin whose hand now stroked the flesh of her belly, whose mouth rained kisses over her breasts. She would not be fooled, no matter what kindnesses he chose to make. Ultimately, all men served their own needs, and demanded payment for any small favour they bestowed. If they were refused, they could be very cruel.

It had been that way after the enchanted night with Devlin so many years ago. Farley had come afterwards to claim his pleasure, but Madeleine refused him. He went into a rage that left her bruised and in pain. The next day, Farley departed on one of his mysterious long trips. By the time he returned, Madeleine knew herself to be with child.

Now Devlin's hands and lips threatened to engulf her in sensation. She remained still, resolving to repay him for rescuing her, for taking in Sophie, for snatching her child from the clutches of death, but she would not allow herself to feel anything.

She pushed on his shoulders, and he lifted his head.

'Shall I please you now, my lord?' She modulated her voice to a velvet smoothness, as she'd rehearsed many times.

He leaned on his elbow, his expression puzzled. 'Pleasure me?'

She deliberately slithered out from beneath him, facing him instead. She ran her finger in circles on his chest. 'I wish to please you. Tell me what I must do to please you.'

He grabbed her hand and searched her face. 'What the devil...?'

She laughed, making a throaty sound Farley insisted she learn. 'Oh? Would you like me to be wicked? I can be wicked, my lord, if that is what you wish.'

He dropped her hand and sat up, rubbing his face.

She pretended to look wounded. 'What is amiss, my lord? I shall do whatever you desire.'

'Stubble it, Maddy.' He swung his legs over the side of the bed and grabbed his clothes.

'Do not be vexed.' Retaining her velvety voice, she pressed herself against his back. 'I would not wish you unhappy.'

His muscles stiffened. 'And I do not wish to play this game of yours. We are not at Lord Farley's establishment, Miss M.'

'Game?' She sat back, blinking in confusion.

He shoved his arms into the sleeves of his shirt and groped around for the rest of his clothes, donning each piece as he came to it. 'You are acting like cheap Haymarket-ware.'

She blinked at him, covering herself with the bed linens. 'I do not know what that means.'

He glared at her. 'It means lightskirt, Cyprian, dolly-mop. Shall I continue?'

Her eyebrows knitted together. 'But that is what I am.'

He grabbed at the linens covering her and yanked them away. Before Madeleine could protest, he picked her up and dumped her into the now-tepid bath water.

'How dare you!' she shouted before she remembered that men did not like it if you showed them anger.

He lunged down at her face, and she drew back, fearful of the price he'd exact from her show of temper. Only an inch lay between their lips.

His voice became disturbingly low. 'You cannot fool me, Maddy. You wanted me as much as I wanted you.' As quickly, he strode out the room, slamming the door behind him.

Dripping with water, Madeleine burst into tears, but she did not know if it was because she had angered him or because what he'd said had been only too true.

'Can you make it fit, Sophie?'

Madeleine stood in the centre of the bedchamber while her friend pulled on the strings of her dress. Though her hair, now in a braid down her back, remained damp, all other signs of the bath had been removed. Not from Madeleine's mind, however, where Devlin's angry eyes continued to haunt. She rubbed her temples.

Sophie tugged on the material of the dress. 'It is too small, Maddy, and the seams cannot be let out.'

'Oh, bother,' she mumbled.

The door slammed. Footsteps sounded in the outer room. 'Bart! Bart!'

Madeleine felt the blood drain from her face. Devlin had returned.

'Where is everybody?' He entered the bedchamber.

Sophie shrank back to a corner. Madeleine braced herself.

Surprisingly, he wore a grin on his face. He walked briskly over to her, lifted her off the ground, and swung her around. 'I have a surprise for us. Where is Bart?'

‘Here I am, Dev.’ Bart appeared in the doorway, holding Linette’s hand. Linette had her thumb in her mouth.

Devlin released Madeleine. ‘We’re moving. Right now. We have to pack.’

‘Did you get us tossed out of here?’ Bart asked, his eyes narrowing.

Devlin clapped Bart on the shoulder, smiling broadly. ‘No, I’ve merely secured lodging spacious enough for the lot of us.’

Madeleine’s hands flew to her face. For all of them? What of sending them away?

‘Explain yourself, lad.’ Bart said.

‘I have procured the lease to Madame LaBelmonde’s apartments,’ Devlin responded, grinning.

‘Madame LaBelmonde?’ Madeleine raised an eyebrow.

‘Two bedchambers above stairs and two below. A parlour, dining room, and a proper kitchen.’ He placed his hands on his hips in satisfaction. ‘It should do very well.’

‘A sizeable rent, I suppose?’ Bart pursed his lips.

Devlin shook his head. ‘Not beyond our touch, once my quarterly portion is in hand.’

Bart clucked his tongue. ‘How do we pay until then?’

Devlin tossed Madeleine a broad wink before answering Bart. ‘I wagered the first month’s rent on a roll of the dice and won. My recent winnings should pay the second.’

‘You wagered the rent?’ Madeleine gasped. Visions of foolish, ruined men, their faces bleak and despairing, leaving Farley’s gaming rooms flashed through her mind. She remembered the sounds of angry words, overheard years ago outside her parents’ bedchambers.

‘Lord Devlin is a sad gamester, ma’am,’ Bart told her.

‘What else was I to do with my time but play cards?’ Devlin countered. ‘We shall go on very well, I promise.’

Madeleine wondered about more than the rent. ‘Who is Madame LaBelmonde?’

Devlin smiled at her. ‘A close neighbour.’

‘Close?’

‘Indeed. She has found a new protector. Lord Tavenish, I believe. He purchased a town house for her. She leaves her furnishings.’

‘Lord Tavenish,’ Madeleine repeated. A frequent visitor at Farley’s, Lord Tavenish had been well over fifty with sagging skin, and a sour smell. Would a town house be worth such a man?

Bart blew out a breath. ‘Well, what is done is done.’

‘Indeed.’ Devlin grinned. ‘We have not a moment to lose. There is a tenant interested in these rooms.’

‘These rooms? Already?’ Bart asked.

‘The matter is completely settled. I called upon our landlord and made an arrangement with him. If we move out today, our debt to him is forgiven.’

Little Linette let go of Bart’s hand and tottered over to Madeleine. ‘Up, Mama.’ She reached her hands up. Bart turned on his heel, muttering about setting to the task and hotheadedness. Sophie quietly crept along the wall until she, too, reached the door.

Devlin turned to Madeleine, his smile taking her breath away. She spun to face the wardrobe, gathering Devlin’s clothing to pack in the trunk.

‘You rented these accommodations to include us?’ She could not believe it. There must be some mistake.

He put his hands on her shoulders and turned her to face him again. ‘Yes, to include you. We could not get on here, all of us, in this small space.’

She dipped her head, hiding her face from him. ‘You are not obliged to house us.’

He tilted her face to him, his fingers under the soft skin of her chin. ‘I am obliged.’

Not that he understood it, but Devlin felt keenly responsible for them. What would happen to them otherwise?

She shook her head.

He held her gaze. 'As you have said, you have nowhere else to go.'

She cast down her eyes.

'Madeleine, you are no prisoner here, if you wish to go.'

Her glance flew back to him. 'I do not wish to leave. You are correct. There is no place for me.' Her voice cracked.

His finger drew a line down her cheek. 'Let us not speak of this now. We have much to do.'

He watched her turn away, stooping down to hand Linette some clothing. 'Put them in the trunk, Linette.'

The laces on the back of her dress were undone. 'Let me lace you,' he said, reaching for them as she stood up again.

She twisted away from his hand. 'It is no use. The dress no longer fits.'

'Change to another then. I will leave the room if you desire privacy.'

She kept her eyes on her daughter, a doll-like miniature of herself. 'I have no other dress.'

'No other dress?'

'Well, there is the horrid red one, but Sophie washed it and it is quite wet still. I must have grown out of this one since last wearing it.'

He studied the frock, and it did indeed look unfashionably old and slightly girlish. 'A long time ago, I collect.'

'The day Farley brought me to London.'

Devlin heard the edge in her voice. How had she come to be in Farley's clutches? 'You brought only one extra dress?'

'I did not want Farley's clothes.'

Devlin raked his fingers through his hair. He had not calculated on having to purchase a wardrobe. Did the little maid and the child need to be clothed as well?

Madeleine regarded him, her eyes serious. 'Do not worry. Sophie will know how to alter it. She is clever at such things. In the meantime, if I go out, I shall wear my cloak. It covers everything.'

'We will get you clothes, Maddy.'

She lifted her eyes to him before walking over to Linette.

Later that afternoon, Madeleine held Linette's hand as she walked through their new rooms. Linette chattered, and she answered automatically, trying to stay out of the way of Devlin and Bart, busily carrying in trunks and boxes.

She had feared Madame LaBelmonde would have furnishings as gaudy and garish as in Farley's establishment, but these rooms were genteel, the golds, reds, and greens muted and beautiful. She might have chosen them herself. Would it not be lovely if this really were her house? She the mistress, and Devlin...

No, she must not pretend. But as she strolled through the rooms, she could not help herself.

She entered the parlour and ran her finger across the polished mahogany and silk upholstery. She pictured herself seated on the couch, and Devlin, on the nearby chair, reading the latest newspaper. Linette sat at her feet, playing with a doll. She ought to be doing something in this fantasy, but what? Her attempts at embroidery used to wind up in tangles, and she had never paid enough attention to sewing to know how to mend.

Sophie walked in the room in such high spirits her usually pale face was flushed with pink.

'Oh, Maddy, it is the loveliest set of rooms I have ever seen. Do you think we may really stay? Look at the furniture. I should like to keep such nice tables polished. Do you think lemon oil or beeswax would do?'

Madeleine stared at her, not having any notion of what best polished wood, nor whether they might stay.

Sophie did not seem to notice she had not responded. 'I shall ask Mr Bart.' Sophie swept out of the room as quickly as she had come in.

'Mama, I want Mr Bart!' Linette pulled at her hand to follow Sophie.

'No, Linette. Mr Bart has much to do right now. He's moving boxes.'

'I want boxes, too.'

'Let's explore the kitchen, shall we?'

She led Linette to the kitchen where the little girl opened cabinet doors, momentarily distracted by new discoveries within. Madeleine ran her hand over the cupboard, imagining life inside this kitchen. She saw herself kneading bread, and Devlin entering, kissing her cheek, and asking for his meal.

Folly! She knew not the first thing about making bread, nor how to cook a meal.

Devlin entered the kitchen, carrying a big wooden box. 'Maddy, is the kitchen well supplied?'

She opened a cupboard. 'There are things in here. Do you suppose it is adequate?'

Devlin stood next to her and peered in the open cupboard. 'Hmm. Well, Bart will know.' He set the box down on the table and walked out.

Much later, the five of them sat around that rough wooden table, having finished a hastily prepared meal of bread from the nearby bakery and hard cheese. Devlin poured each of them another glass of wine, giving Linette, seated on his lap, a small sip from his own glass. The little girl puckered her lips at the taste, and he laughed.

Madeleine gazed at all of them. She pretended they were a family, without a care, sharing a simple meal and pleasant conversation. The thought made her smile.

Devlin caught her eye and winked at her. 'I propose a toast.' He raised his glass.

'I want toast,' Linette said.

'To our new abode,' Devlin said.

'New 'bode,' Linette parroted.

'Hear, hear,' Bart responded.

'It is a lovely place.' Madeleine sipped her wine and swept her gaze from corner to corner.

Devlin gave her a smile. He'd had no idea that pleasing her would make him feel mellow and strangely content. He raised his glass again while Bart sliced a piece of cheese and handed it to Sophie. Little Linette banged on the table with both hands.

The mellow feeling returned. 'Tomorrow, ladies, we shall visit the mantua maker. Outfit you properly.'

Panic came over the shy Sophie's face. 'Oh, no, my lord.'

Devlin at last saw an opportunity to befriend the skittish young woman. 'Would you not like a pretty dress or two?'

Sophie shook her head and dared to glance up at him for a moment. 'No pretty dress. Nothing pretty. A bit of fabric will do, if it is not too dear. I do not presume to ask, my lord.'

'Sophie, you are part of our household. You deserve decent clothing.'

'Yes, my lord.' She slid off her stool and cleared the dishes.

Devlin rolled his eyes and caught Bart's disapproving look before the man followed Sophie out of the room.

'Do not mind her, Devlin,' Madeleine said. 'She does not want presents, I think.'

He took a gulp of his wine. Linette relaxed against his chest, still at last.

'She is afraid of you.'

He gave a dry laugh. 'Indeed.'

'It is because you are a man.'

He ran a finger through Linette's hair, brushing it off the child's forehead. 'Bart is a man, I've noticed.'

'True.' She looked quizzical.

‘Well, Maddy, shall you and I visit the modiste or do you choose to be your own dressmaker, too?’

He meant to be good-tempered, but she responded with a wounded look.

‘I cannot sew.’

Lord, women were difficult.

‘It is of no consequence,’ he said, hoping to return to her good graces. ‘I’m sure we can find a skilful mantua maker. I would be pleased to see you in a pretty new dress.’

Her countenance changed, as if he had said something of great importance that had never occurred to her before. ‘Of course. I understand perfectly.’

He wished he understood. Devlin poured himself more wine and drained the entire contents of his glass. It was easier to evade the musket balls of an entire French battalion than to navigate a simple conversation with a female.

‘Linette is falling asleep. I need to make her ready for bed.’ Madeleine rose from her chair.

‘I’ll carry her.’ Devlin lifted Linette, and the little girl relaxed against him, a warm bundle more than comfortable against his shoulder.

He followed Madeleine into the bedchamber where they had set up Linette’s bed. A connecting door joined the two upstairs bedchambers. He wanted to think of Madeleine knocking softly on that door and coming to him in the night, but, after the morning’s débâcle, he was sure she would not do so.

Madeleine pulled out a tiny nightdress from the bureau. Linette’s meagre supply of clothing barely filled half a drawer, and Devlin vowed to ensure the child, as well as the mother, had a pretty new wardrobe.

‘Place her on the bed, please.’

He did so as gently as he could. ‘Toast,’ Linette murmured, opening her eyes momentarily.

Madeleine glanced at Devlin and smiled. How pleasant it felt. He had no idea domesticity could be so comfortable.

After she settled the child into bed and kissed the soft pink forehead, Devlin wrapped his arm around her and squeezed. ‘She’s a fine child, Maddy.’

‘She is everything to me.’ Her voice shook with emotion.

Madeleine leaned her head against Devlin’s shoulder. His strong arm felt so comfortable, she could almost imagine he belonged to her and they were gazing upon their own—

No, she must not lapse into that particular fantasy. She must remember that Devlin wished to see her in pretty dresses, just as Farley had. She must remember that she owed him for his kindness.

‘Shall I ready myself for bed as well, sir?’ She modulated her voice as she had been used to doing for these last years.

He placed her away from him and looked into her face. Madeleine knew how to control her expression. She smiled, half-demurely, half-seductively. She gently caressed his neck, leaning forward so when he glanced down, a peek of the rounded shape of her breasts was clearly visible. She led him to the connecting door, pulled him into the other room, closing the door behind her.

‘Shall I kiss you?’ she purred, wrapping her arms around his neck. Not waiting for his answer, she stood on tiptoe and touched her lips to his.

Yes, she could do this, she thought, keeping her body in firm control. She could indeed pleasure Devlin and repay his kindness without ever pleasuring herself.

Devlin wound his arms around her and pressed her against him. Desire flared inside him, and he deepened the kiss. She reached her hands around to loosen the already loose strings of her dress. It fell to the floor, leaving only her corset and shift. He ran his hands across her bare shoulders.

So lovely. So soft. Like honey. He wanted her. Wanted to plunge into her, join himself to her and not feel so alone.

‘Shall we go to the bed, my lord?’

The words echoed in his mind, from long ago.

He released her, watching as she moved toward the bed. She tossed a seductive glance over her shoulder.

She climbed onto the bed and turned to face him. 'Come, let me remove your clothing.'

He rubbed the back of his neck. And stood his ground.

'Come,' she purred, reaching her arms above her head, arching her back. 'Come, my lord.'

Devlin spoke quietly. 'You must call me Devlin. Did you forget that, Maddy?'

She rolled to her side and stared at him.

'This is not Farley's establishment.' He stared back.

She twisted the sheet in her hand.

'Go to your room, Maddy. Your daughter might need you this night.'

She sat up. 'No.'

'I do not want your favours.' Something else from her, perhaps, but not what Farley required of her.

'But you must.' A desperate look came over her.

'No.'

She scampered off the bed and gathered her dress, holding it in front of her, covering herself with it. 'Please, Devlin, you must let me make love to you. You must.' Her words came out between laboured gasps.

'No, Maddy.'

He walked to the door and opened it.

'Devlin, I am used to this. It is not difficult. I will pleasure you. It will be pleasant, I promise you.' Tears sprang to her eyes.

With every sensation in his male body, Devlin wanted to accept her offer, but he could not bear the emptiness in her seductive words. He well remembered what had passed between them that first time and this was not it.

She rubbed her eyes, now red and swollen. Her nose had turned bright pink. 'I...I wish to show you my gratitude.'

'Gratitude? Do you think I desire your lovemaking out of gratitude?'

Confusion wrinkled her brow. Devlin suspected that was not part of her practised repertoire. She clutched her dress in her hands. 'You want me, I know you do. Men like to...to... You liked it, too.'

He had indeed, but not when her eyes stared vacantly and her words were rehearsed.

'Go to bed, Maddy. Your own bed, not mine.'

She dropped her dress to the floor and wound her arms around his neck, kissing wherever her lips could reach. At least her rehearsed seduction had fled, but her desperation was no better. None the less, his body flared to life. He picked her up and she sighed in relief, nuzzling his neck. He carried her through the doorway and dropped her on to the large bed in the other room.

'No, Devlin.' She grabbed the front of his shirt, trying to pull him back. 'You do not understand. I must do this.'

He moved her hands away, trying to be gentle, but not succeeding. The demands of his body were making him harsh. 'You do not need to bed me. It is not something I demand of you.'

'But it is the only thing I can do.'

Madeleine watched him turn away from her and walk toward the door. 'You do not understand,' she whispered. 'It is the only thing I can do.'

He did not look back, but closed the door behind him, leaving her alone.

Devlin fled down the staircase and out into the damp night air. He strode through lamp-lit streets until reaching the nearest gaming house. Instead of sounding the knocker, he stood staring at the entrance. What would he find inside? Cigar smoke? Bad brandy? The luck of the draw? It was not ennui he sought to dispel this night, but the turbulence left in Madeleine's wake.

Why not accept her gratitude and bed her? He'd rescued her from Farley's, hadn't he? Taken in her child and her mouse of a maid. Provided them proper lodgings.

Devlin turned from the door of the gaming establishment and walked back to the street. When he had first met her, she had come to him, not with gratitude, but desire. Almost like loving him. He had never forgotten.

He wandered slowly through the streets, until he found himself back at the door of his expensive new rooms. The place was quiet as he entered, a single candle providing light. He glanced toward the back of the place where the two other bedchambers were located and wondered what might be occurring behind those closed doors. Was Bart holding the frail Sophie protectively, lest the 'lord' attack her in the night? Had Sophie offered her body to Bart, as well? Had he accepted?

Devlin would bet a month's blunt Bart had not made a mull of things as he had, and that, on the morrow, the little maid would gaze upon Bart's craggy features with adoration.

Devlin entered Madeleine's room quietly. The dim illumination of the street lamp shone on Linette's sleeping figure, her thumb in her mouth. Devlin smiled and gently pulled out her thumb. The little girl stirred, her long dark eyelashes fluttering. She popped the thumb back in.

Madeleine's bed was empty, and he felt a moment's anxiety, until he spied her curled up on the windowseat, sound asleep, as innocent and vulnerable as her daughter.

They were both beautiful, these charges of his, and totally dependent upon him. It frightened him, worse than leading men into battle. Soldiers knew the stakes were death, but they had the tools to fight. If he failed Madeleine and Linette, they would be at the mercy of creatures like Farley and would have no weapons with which to protect themselves.

He would not fail them, he vowed. He would see to their needs no matter what the cost.

Devlin gathered Madeleine in his arms, her weight surprisingly like a feather. He carried her to the bed.

'Only thing I can do,' she murmured, resting her head on his shoulder, much like her little girl had done earlier.

'Hush, Maddy,' he whispered. 'You'll wake Linette.'

'Linette,' she murmured. 'All I have.'

'Not any more, Miss England.' Devlin laid her carefully on the bed and tucked the covers around her. 'Now you have me, as well.'

Chapter Five

Madeleine held tightly on to Devlin's arm as they strolled the pavements of London in the bright morning sun. She pulled the hood of her cape to obscure as much of her face as possible. Still, she felt exposed.

'You will not take me to a fashionable modiste, will you, Devlin?' The thought of walking down Bond Street filled her with dread.

Devlin regarded her with an amused expression. 'No, indeed, Maddy. Would I subject you to such a terrible thing?'

That made her laugh. 'Do not tease me. It is merely that I would not want to be seen.'

'Do not worry, goose. You were always masked, were you not? No one will recognise you.' He patted her hand comfortingly.

'Of course. So silly of me.'

She took a deep breath. He did not understand. Farley's patrons did not concern her, but perhaps those she did fear encountering would not recognise her either. Surely the years had altered her?

'Where are we bound, then?' She gazed up at Devlin, so tall and handsome. His green eyes sparkled in the sunlight, like emeralds on a necklace a young man had once bestowed upon her before Farley snatched it away. If necessity bade her to walk in daylight, it pleased her to be beside him.

'Bart found a dressmaker only four streets from here,' Devlin said. 'How he should know about dressmakers foxes me.'

She laughed. 'Bart is very clever, isn't he? He and Sophie. I do believe they can do everything.'

'Unlike me, I suppose.' He smiled, but the humour did not reach his voice.

'You are the hub around which all revolves.' She spoke absently, transfixed by a coach rumbling down the street. 'Oh, look at the matched greys. How finely they step together. They are magnificent, are they not?'

'Indeed,' he answered.

She watched the coach-and-four until it drove out of sight. 'Oh, my.' She cast one last glance in the direction it had disappeared. 'What were you saying, Devlin?'

'I was remarking about how utterly useless you find me.'

She glanced at him. 'You are funning me again. What would have happened to me and Linette without you, Devlin?'

Madeleine felt her face flush. She should not have spoken so. To suggest he had any obligation to her was very bad of her. She had awoken in her own bed this morning. The only service she could render him, he'd refused.

'It is I who am useless, not you, Devlin.' She sighed. 'I am skilled at nothing...well, nothing of consequence.'

A curricule drawn by two fine roans raced by. Madeleine stopped to watch it.

'Do you like horses, Maddy?'

'What?' She glanced at him. 'Oh, horses. I used to like horses.'

'Not now?' His mouth turned up at one corner.

'I have not been on a horse since...for many years.'

'You ride, then?'

She had careened over the hills, giving her mare her head, clearing hedges, sailing over streams. Nothing unseated her. She outrode every boy in the county and most of the men. When she could remain undiscovered, she spent whole days on horseback.

Had she not been out in the country on her mare, unchaperoned as usual, she might not have met Farley, might not have succumbed to his charm. Never riding again was fitting punishment for her fatal indiscretion.

She blinked away the regret. 'You might say I used to ride horses as well as I now ride men.'

'Maddy!' Devlin stopped in the centre of the pavement and grabbed her by the shoulders. 'Do not speak like that. I ought to throttle you.'

She tilted her chin defiantly. 'As you wish, sir.'

He let go of her and rubbed his brow. 'Deuce, you know I will not hit you, but why say such a thing?'

'Because it is true. I know what I am, Devlin. There is no use trying to make me otherwise. It is my only skill. Bart and Sophie can do all sorts of useful things. You, too. You can win at cards and go about in society. You have fought in the war. What could be more useful than that? But me, there is nothing else I know how to do.'

He extended his hand to her, wanting to crush her against him and kiss her until she took back her words. Though the kissing part might not prove the point, exactly, he admitted. He dropped his hand and, putting her arm through his, resumed walking.

After a short distance in silence, he said, 'That's what you meant last night. Saying it was the only thing you could do.'

She did not reply.

Devlin held his tongue. This was no place for such a conversation in any event. Besides, each time some handsome equipage passed by in the street, she slowed her pace a little.

He chuckled. 'Horse mad, are you?'

She pointedly turned her head away from him.

'Now do not deny it, Maddy. You are horse mad. I recognise the signs. I was myself, as a boy. Why, I liked being with the grooms better than anyone else. My brother, the heir, could not keep up with me when I rode, though he's a good ten years my senior. Nothing he could do but report to Father that I was about to break my neck.'

He threw a penny to the boy who had swept the street in front of where they crossed.

'Oh, look at all the shops!' Madeleine exclaimed. 'I had not reckoned there to be so many.'

Like a child at a fair she turned her head every which way, remarking on all the delicious smells and sights.

'You have not been to these shops?'

She laughed. 'Indeed not. I always wondered what the London shops would be like.'

'You've been in London three years and have never seen the shops?' This was not to be believed.

'Lord Farley did not take me to shops.'

This time Devlin stopped. 'Do you mean that devil did not let you out of that house?'

'Not as bad as all that, I assure you.' She patted his hand and resumed walking. 'When Linette was big enough, I was allowed to take her to the park across the street. But only in the morning, not when other people might be about. And there was a small garden in the back of the house. Sophie and I were allowed to tend it, though I mostly had the task of digging the dirt, because I did not have the least notion how to make the flowers grow. I enjoyed feeling the soil in my hands, though.'

Such a small space of geography in which to spend more than three years. 'I wish Farley to the devil.'

She gave him a look. It struck him as almost the same expression Sophie bestowed on Bart.

As they stood at the entrance to a shop with an elegant brass nameplate saying 'Madame Emeraude', Madeleine shrank back. Devlin had to practically pull her into the establishment. She held her fingers to the hood of her cloak, covering her face.

A modishly dressed woman emerged from the back. 'May I be of assistance?'

Since Madeleine had turned away, Devlin spoke. 'Good morning. Madame Emeraude, I collect?'

The woman nodded.

Devlin gestured to Madeleine. 'The young lady is in need of some new dresses.'

‘Certainly, sir. Shall I show you some fashion plates, or do you have certain styles in mind?’

It irritated Devlin that the dressmaker addressed him directly instead of Madeleine, as if Madeleine were his fancy piece to dress as he wished, but, he supposed, in this neighbourhood, her clientele were almost exclusively from the demimonde.

‘Shall we step into the other room?’ She gestured elegantly.

He pulled Madeleine along to the private dressing room in the back. ‘The young lady is in somewhat of a fix. You see, she has only the dress she wears and we were hopeful to purchase something already made up.’

Understanding lit the woman’s eyes. ‘Let me see her.’

Since Madeleine was acting like a stick, Devlin had no choice but to treat her that way. He turned her toward the dressmaker and removed the cloak that obscured her.

‘Oh,’ said the woman in surprise. ‘Miss M, is it not? How delightful to see you again.’

‘How do you do, ma’am,’ Madeleine murmured politely, though Devlin did not miss the splotches of red on her cheeks.

‘Deuce,’ said Devlin.

‘Why, I believe I have a dress ready for you,’ said Madame Emeraude helpfully. ‘Do you recall we fitted it not a fortnight ago? Wait a moment and I shall see—’

‘No!’ Madeleine cried.

Devlin interceded, putting his arm around Madeleine. ‘We do not wish that dress.’

Madame Emeraude looked from the one of them to the other. ‘I see. It is a new day, is it not? Well, I am pleased for you, miss. That other one was charming, but I shall have no business with him, I tell you, until he pays—’ She caught herself. ‘I beg pardon. I only meant I wish you well, Miss M.’

‘Thank you,’ Madeleine said, continuing to look miserable.

Madame Emeraude smiled and began to consider her, stepping around her. ‘Oh, my,’ she said as she saw the open laces of Madeleine’s dress. ‘This dress does not fit. No, no, no. This will never, never do.’

‘You see our predicament.’ Devlin smiled. Madeleine fixed her interest on the floor.

‘Let me show you a few things I have on hand.’

Madame Emeraude signalled an assistant, who carried in one dress after another. Madeleine seemed to regard each garment with horror. They were, Devlin thought, merely dresses. A little fancy, perhaps.

As Madame conferred with her assistant, Madeleine whispered to him, ‘Devlin, please do not make me wear those dresses. This one I have will do, or Sophie can make me a plain one.’

‘What is wrong with them?’

‘They are not...respectable.’

He regarded her, rubbing his chin. ‘I see.’

When Madame Emeraude came back to them, Devlin took the woman aside and spoke to her. Madeleine watched them, the modiste nodding and looking her way. She dearly wished to leave this place where the proprietress knew her as Miss M.

Devlin came back to her. ‘Madame Emeraude is ordering a hack. She has given me the direction of another dressmaker where we will go next.’ He held her cloak open for her. ‘I do not wish to. Let us go home, please.’ This short excursion had already been mortifying.

‘We will try this other place first. You need clothes, Maddy.’

In the hack she continued trying to persuade him. ‘I believe Sophie could teach me to sew, Devlin. A piece of cloth would be enough.’

He would not listen. He did not understand. Though it was exciting to be out among the carriages and shops, it was frightening, as well. She would always be face to face with what she was.

Madeleine peeked out at the passing scenery, the bustle of London with the pedestrians so intent on their destinations and the tradesmen so occupied with peddling wares. She could not hide

forever. How could she rear Linette if she hid? Her daughter would have to go out into that world, too. She was determined that Linette's life be respectable, though nothing could ever change what Madeleine was inside.

If Devlin Steele was determined she should have clothes, she was determined they be respectable ones.

'Are you taking me to Bond Street?' she asked, meaning to sound merely curious, but her voice shook.

He smiled at her. 'Not to Bond Street. We are directed to a modiste who dresses the worthy daughters of our bankers and merchants.'

'Very well.' Not the fashionable part of town. No chance of encountering members of the ton.

They discovered a goldmine. The wealthy daughter of an East India merchant had abandoned her trousseau for one made at a fashionable address. The young woman was of Madeleine's size, and the dresses were exquisitely tasteful attempts by the modiste to expand her clientele.

Madeleine quarrelled with Devlin over the number of dresses he would purchase, wanting no more than two or three. She adamantly refused to let him include even one evening dress and would not even discuss the riding habit. His easy acquiescence in these last two matters made her momentarily suspicious, but he whisked her off to the milliner next door and a new set of arguments became necessary.

As he made arrangements for the delivery of his final purchase of several bonnets for Madeleine and one very plain one for Sophie, Madeleine gazed in the mirror.

She wore a pale lilac muslin walking dress adorned only by vertical tucks in the bodice edged by a plain purple ribbon. A blue spencer, lilac gloves, and a modest straw bonnet, simply adorned with a blue bow, completed the ensemble. She even carried a reticule.

Studying herself in the glass was like gazing into the distant past.

Devlin's image appeared behind her. 'You look very well, Maddy.'

She swallowed the surge of emotion that had risen in her throat. 'It seems like too much...'

He held up his hand. 'No more of that. We still need to stop by the shoemaker.'

She opened her mouth to protest, but as he took her hand and tucked it in his arm, he quickly added, 'Do you suppose we could convince Sophie to be measured for new shoes?'

For all his generosity to herself, his thinking of Sophie most touched her heart. She cast him a smile. 'Perhaps we should charge Bart with such a task.'

He laughed as he escorted her out the door to the street. 'Very wise idea.'

Madeleine had an illusion of being transported to the town of her childhood. The pavement was more crowded, indeed, and the shops more varied and numerous, but it was a most respectable street, and her dress indistinguishable from other young ladies shopping. Or so she thought. She still received many curious looks.

'Devlin, are you sure my appearance is acceptable?'

Devlin had noticed the admiring glances of the men and appraising looks of the women. He could not help but be proud to be Madeleine's escort. Beautiful even in her own ill-fitting frock, she quite took his breath away in her new walking dress.

'You look lovely,' he whispered back.

This news did not appear to cheer her. She furrowed her brow. Too bad some choice piece of horseflesh did not come into view to distract her.

Devlin caught sight of a shop window. 'We must go in here.' He pulled her into the shop. 'Must not forget our girl.'

They entered a toy store with shelf after shelf of dolls, toy soldiers, and miniature coaches and wagons. An exquisite wax doll with real hair as dark and curly as Linette's caught Devlin's eye. He vowed he must purchase it for Linette. Madeleine adamantly refused, saying the child was too young to care for such a treasure. He settled instead for a porcelain-faced baby doll, a ball and blocks.

As he finished giving the direction for the toys to be delivered that afternoon, he spied a carved wooden horse and, thinking perhaps the little girl might be horse-mad like her mother, added it to his purchases.

Back on the street, a handsome carriage drawn by a set of matching bays approached in their direction. Devlin frowned as he spied the crest. The carriage stopped next to them. As Madeleine shrank back, Devlin stepped forward to greet its passenger.

‘Devlin, it has been too long,’ the fair-haired lady at the carriage window exclaimed.

‘How are you, Serena?’ His sister-in-law was a good creature, well intentioned, eminently correct, with classical looks and very little in common with Devlin except a connection to his brother.

‘I am well, as usual,’ she responded in her soft voice. ‘And you, brother? We do worry when you do not call.’

‘I have been shockingly remiss, but I’m fit, I assure you.’

His sister-in-law gazed curiously at Madeleine. It had never entered his mind that he’d be required to introduce Madeleine to anyone, least of all his sister-in-law, the Marchioness.

He pulled Madeleine forward, needing to exert a little physical effort to do so. ‘Serena, may I present Miss England. Miss England, the Marchioness of Heronvale, my sister-in-law.’

Madeleine executed a very correct curtsy.

‘Have we met before, Miss England? I do not recall.’

Madeleine, with her eyes downcast replied, ‘No, madam.’

‘Well, perhaps I may convey you both to your destination? I would be pleased to do so.’

Devlin suspected Serena would be very pleased for an opportunity to find out who her brother-in-law escorted unchaperoned through this shopping district. He felt Madeleine painfully squeeze his arm.

‘I believe Miss England has one or two more shops to visit, but that was kind of you, Serena.’

‘Are the shops worthwhile, Miss England? I confess I have never visited the ones on this street.’

‘They suit me very well, madam,’ responded Madeleine in a quiet voice.

‘Perhaps you could recommend one to me,’ the Marchioness persisted. Devlin knew her inquiry to be meant in a friendly way, but he also knew his brother’s wife was nearly as fixed on him securing his future as was his brother. She wanted nothing more than to see him happily married; the Marquess wanted merely to keep his brother’s fortune secure.

‘I would not presume to.’ Madeleine looked miserable. Only his firm hold on her arm kept her from bolting, he suspected.

A hackney coach came from behind, its driver shouting for the carriage to move on.

‘Oh, dear,’ said Serena. ‘We had better go.’

‘Indeed,’ replied Devlin.

‘Please call soon, Devlin. My pleasure, Miss England.’ The carriage moved forward and these last words faded with distance.

‘Devlin, may we please go home now?’ Madeleine raised a shaking hand to her bonnet.

‘No,’ he said mildly, determined for her not to be made uncomfortable by her encounter with Serena. ‘We need to have you measured for shoes and I must not return without cloth for Sophie.’

‘Oh, yes, I quite forgot Sophie’s cloth,’ she murmured. A racing phaeton whizzed by. She did not even notice.

‘Maddy, were you made uncomfortable by my sister-in-law?’

They walked a few steps before she answered. ‘It was very improper to introduce me to her.’

‘I disagree. It would have been ill-mannered not to introduce you. An insult to you.’

He glanced at her, seeing her brows knitted together and her bottom lip trembling slightly. ‘A fine lady like the Marchioness should not be made to converse with one such as me.’

‘Maddy, I refuse to allow you to speak so. You have studied your appearance. You could not be more presentable.’ He did not yet know the story, but he would wager she’d not chosen her life with Farley. But who would choose such a life? Only a woman with no other choice.

‘My appearance does not alter the fact that you should not have introduced a marchioness to... to Haymarket-ware.’

‘I refuse for you to speak so,’ he said.

She did not look at him. ‘I will endeavour to obey you, my lord.’

He yanked open the door to the shoemaker.

After he’d ordered various pairs of shoes for her, he seemed relaxed again. By the time they’d selected several pieces of material at the cloth merchant’s shop, they were back in temper with each other.

Devlin hailed a hack. As he negotiated with the driver, Madeleine noticed a gentleman across the street looking at her.

Farley.

He saw her look in his direction and tipped his hat to her. Her heart pounded wildly, and she feared she might vomit. She felt Farley’s eyes on her the entire time it took for Devlin to lift her into the hack.

As they pulled away, he saluted her once more.

Lord Edwin Farley watched the hack start off down the street. He had taken to frequenting a tobacconist on this row, one of the deplorable economies he was forced to make in his constrained financial circumstances. At first he’d noticed the young lady in the lilac and blue with a connoisseur’s appreciation, but when he saw it was Madeleine, he froze. All that beauty, and he’d let her fall into the hands of Devlin Steele. It irritated him beyond belief.

He’d hoped to recoup from his recent bad luck by playing until Steele owed him a bundle. The Marquess of Heronvale would have redeemed his little brother’s vowels, even if the sum had been large. Everyone knew the older brother doted on the younger one. But Farley had lost instead. If that were not bad enough, he’d impulsively used Madeleine to settle his debt. Damned Steele.

The hack turned the corner and disappeared from his sight. He resumed his stroll down the pavement. Madeleine had looked quite fetching in that lavender confection. His body stirred merely thinking about her.

He’d have her back, he vowed. He’d unpeel those layers of clothing from her and bed her like she’d never been bedded before. He’d make her beg for him, make her pant with wanting him. She’d been easy to seduce as a girl. He’d only had to say a few pretty words to her, and she’d been his. He laughed, remembering how easy it had been to entice her to his room that night, her father bursting in at the perfect moment—when she’d been naked on top of him.

Yes, he’d get her back, he vowed. This time without the child she was stupid enough not to prevent. Perhaps he could make some money on the child. He knew men whose tastes went to ones as young as that. A little beauty like her mother, she would likely sell at a good price.

What revenge ought he to exact upon Steele? It would give him added pleasure to give that matter some thought.

Humming and jauntily swinging his walking stick, Farley continued on his way.

Chapter Six

The packages from their shopping expedition arrived that afternoon amid much excitement. The wide eyes of little Linette as she opened hers made all the extravagance worthwhile. Sophie, whom Devlin did not expect to break out in raptures, reverently fingered the cloth they had purchased.

‘Thank you, my lord,’ Sophie whispered, though she did not meet his eye while saying it.

‘You did tolerably well, Dev,’ Bart said, watching Sophie’s every movement.

‘Indeed?’ He laughed. ‘I am unused to such high praise from you.’

‘The lass is happy. Mind you do not tease her, now.’ Bart shook his finger in warning.

Devlin tried to stifle his grin. ‘I shall endeavour not to.’

Madeleine was unusually quiet. She excused herself, saying she wished to unpack her dresses. Thinking of it, Devlin realised she had been just as solemn on the ride back home.

Linette held the horse up to Devlin, pulling on his trousers as she did so. ‘Horse! Horse!’ she said excitedly. It was inevitable. The horse captured the little girl’s attention and the expensive doll was ignored. Devlin sat down on the floor.

‘Shall we build a stable for your horse, Lady Lin?’ He gathered the blocks together and started building.

‘Wady Win,’ Linette parroted.

‘How much did all this cost, might I ask?’ Bart’s voice was deceptively casual.

‘I think you had better not ask,’ Devlin said ruefully. ‘I thought I might pay a visit to my brother tomorrow.’

Madeleine walked back into the room. ‘You will visit your brother?’

She did not need to know he intended to ask his brother for a small advance. ‘I promised my sister-in-law, as you recall.’

‘Oh.’ She sat on the settee and watched Devlin and Linette build the promised stable with the blocks.

‘Would you like me to make tea, Maddy?’ Sophie asked, dropping her fabric back into its box.

Madeleine popped up. ‘I will do it.’

‘You, Maddy?’ Sophie said. ‘It is not necessary.’

‘I want to. It is not so difficult, is it?’

‘Neigh! Neigh!’ Linette galloped her wooden horse, trying to make it jump over the blocks. The blocks tumbled.

‘Now, I was building that.’ Devlin ruffled the girl’s hair, making her giggle. He kept an eye on the mother.

‘I will do it, Maddy. Do not trouble yourself.’ Sophie started for the kitchen.

Madeleine insisted. ‘No, I will do it.’

‘It is my job,’ Sophie said, visibly upset.

Madeleine put her hands on her hips. ‘I would like to make it. I am tired of being waited upon as if I am no use at all.’

‘But, but...’ Sophie burst into tears and ran out.

‘That was badly done, miss.’ Bart gave her a stern expression. ‘The lass wishes to serve you. She credits you with sparing her much hardship.’ He marched after Sophie.

Madeleine glanced at Devlin, her hand rubbing her throat. ‘I did not mean to make her cry.’

Devlin understood. She wanted to feel she had some use beyond the bedchamber. He had even less to offer, except the money his brother controlled, if he could get it. If Madeleine wished to make tea, what was the harm?

He turned back to the blocks. ‘Maddy, if it would not be too much trouble, would you make me some tea?’

The next morning Devlin walked up to an impressive town house on Grosvenor Square and rapped with the shiny brass knocker. The heavy door opened and a solemn-faced butler almost broke into a smile.

‘Master Devlin.’

‘Barclay, you never change.’ Devlin did smile. ‘I trust you are well?’

The man took his hat and gloves. ‘Indeed, I am, Master Devlin.’

‘Is my brother here?’

‘He is expected directly, my lord. Shall I announce you to her ladyship?’

‘If you please.’

He followed Barclay to the parlour, decorated with Serena’s usual perfection, couches and chairs arranged to put visitors at ease. A moment later, the Marchioness came through the door.

‘Devlin, you kept your promise. How good to see you.’ She reached out her hands to him.

He clasped them warmly and kissed her cheek. ‘Serena, you are in excellent looks, as usual.’ His brother’s wife had the cool beauty of the fine china figurines gracing the mantelpiece, disguising her warm-hearted nature. Her reserve and unceasing correctness could so easily be mistaken for coldness.

She coloured slightly. ‘Do sit with me and tell me how you go on. I’ve already rung for tea.’

He joined her on the couch. ‘I am well, Serena.’

She peered at him worriedly. ‘Are you sure? You look a little pale. Do your wounds still pain you?’

He laughed. ‘I am quite well. Thoroughly recovered and there is no need to fuss over me. Where is Ned?’

‘Attending to some business.’ Her brows knit together. ‘Are you in trouble, Devlin?’

‘Good God, no, Serena.’ Her solicitude rivalled his brother’s. ‘I have something to discuss. Nothing to signify.’

The tea arrived and she poured with precision. He sipped the liquid, brewed to perfection, and thought how different this cup was from the strong, leaf-filled concoction Madeleine had made the day before.

Serena spoke. ‘It was pleasant seeing you yesterday.’

‘Indeed.’

‘That young lady—Miss England, I believe—was lovely. Who is she, Devlin?’

He should have expected this question. He gave Serena a direct look. ‘An acquaintance.’

Her eyebrows raised.

He held her gaze.

Serena glanced down demurely. ‘Does she interest you?’

Did Madeleine interest him? Keeping her safe interested him. Making love to her interested him, but he would not explain that to Serena. At least Serena must not suspect Madeleine to be anything but a well-bred young lady, unchaperoned though she had been. She would not have mentioned Madeleine at all if she had thought her to be Haymarket-ware, as Madeleine called herself.

‘She is an acquaintance, Serena,’ he repeated in a mild voice.

She tilted her head sceptically, but was much too well bred to press any further.

They sat in awkward silence.

‘I should tell you I have moved, Serena.’

She peered at him. ‘Moved? For what reason?’

Devlin paused. ‘No reason.’

‘Some difficulty with the rent?’

‘No.’ Devlin hid his impatience with a small laugh. ‘Why do you suppose I should have difficulty with the rent? You and Ned. I cannot say who is the worse. I am not in difficulty. I am well able to take care of myself. At six and twenty I should know how to go on. I survived Napoleon’s army, if you recall.’

Serena looked stricken. 'But you were so badly injured. We feared you would not live. You do not realise how close a thing it was.' She fished a lace-edged handkerchief from her sleeve and dabbed her eyes. 'And you have been gambling so. Ned was concerned because no one has seen you for days.'

'Ned can go to the dev—' This was too much. 'Good God, what does he do, scour the town for news of me?'

Serena's eyes glittered with tears. 'I believe he hears word of you at White's,' she replied in all seriousness.

Devlin burst into laughter. He sat down next to her and put his arm around her, squeezing affectionately. 'Dear sister, I beg your pardon. I do not mean to upset you. I know you and my brother mean well, but you forget I'm out of leading strings.'

She blushed and straightened her posture. 'I am sure we do not.'

'Tell me how you and Ned go on? Is my brother still managing the family affairs to perfection?'

Serena lifted her chin protectively. 'Ned has much on his shoulders.'

Devlin gave her a kind smile. 'Indeed he does. He is a man to admire, Serena. I mean that.'

'I have heard from your sisters and brother. They are excellent correspondents.'

Unlike himself who wrote little and visited less.

'Indeed? What is the family news?'

Serena, with a wistfulness in her voice, chattered on about the trifling activities of his nephews and nieces. Percy's son, Jeffrey, the eldest, at Eton. Rebecca, Helen's daughter, learning the pianoforte. All the little ones merging into a blur. He listened with as interested an expression as he could muster. Serena doted on all the children. By far she was their favourite aunt. And he, the Waterloo Dragoon, was their hero uncle, even though he had difficulty keeping their names straight.

What a pity Serena had not had a child. Fate had no notion of fair play. She would make a perfect mother, and a loving one, as well. He suspected her disappointment in that quarter was immense.

'And you, Serena? How do you go on?'

'I am well.' A sad look came over her face.

Devlin gave her another hug. She would not wish to speak of her disappointment at not presenting the Marquess with an heir.

'Dear sister,' he murmured.

She recovered herself. 'Ned will be here directly. Will you wait for him?'

He had little choice. 'Serena,' he said, surmising a change of conversation was in order, 'do you suppose Ned would mind if I borrowed a pair of horses some morning? I've a notion to ride.'

'You will ride again?' she said brightly. He had not been on a horse since charging the French, east of the Brussels road. 'Indeed he will not mind. He will be glad of it, and I will personally ask Barclay to instruct the stable to provide any horse you wish.'

'Any two horses. I...I wish to have Bart join me.'

'Two horses it is.' She smiled.

The parlour door opened and the Marquess strode in at a quicker pace than was his custom. Devlin stood to greet him.

'Devlin, how good to see you.' Equally uncharacteristic of him, he embraced Devlin heartily.

This idol of his childhood, his oldest brother Ned, usually did not betray emotion. Ned always could be counted on to remain unflappable when his youngest brother came begging for his help out of the latest scrape. Because of those days, Devlin always felt in awe of that tall, ramrod-straight figure. He always expected to crane his neck to look at Ned. It never failed to be a shock when he found himself half a head taller and his brother going grey at the temples.

'What brings you to call?' Ned asked with such surprise, it suggested he had given up altogether on a visit from Devlin.

'I wished to see you and Serena, of course, but I also have a matter of business to discuss with you, if it is convenient.'

Ned regained that strict composure. 'Indeed. We shall go into the library. You will excuse us, Serena?'

With a nod to his wife, he preceded Devlin out the door. Devlin followed dutifully, feeling much like that little boy, in a scrape once more.

Inside that book-lined room, Ned poured two glasses of port. Devlin glanced at the shelves and had the incongruous thought that Madeleine might enjoy a good book. Not the sort of book to be found in this room, he supposed, but perhaps a Miniver Press novel such as his sisters had read when they sat by his sick bed.

Ned handed him his glass. 'What did you wish to discuss?'

Devlin sipped and paced the room, trying to figure out the best way to present this.

'Are you in trouble?' Ned's voice was low and steady.

Devlin flashed him an irritated glance and muttered, 'You and Serena.' Speaking more firmly, he said, 'I am not in trouble.'

His brother's face remained impassive.

Devlin took a gulp of port. 'I have moved.'

'Yes?'

'To a larger place.'

'You required a larger place?' A disapproving tone crept into his brother's speech.

'It was too good an opportunity to pass up. On the same street, but a much better situation.'

'And?' One of Ned's eyebrows rose.

Devlin took a deep breath. 'I am short of money as a result. I would ask if you would advance me some additional funds until next quarter.'

His brother did not drop his gaze, nor did his expression change, even a muscle. Devlin knew he was considering, weighing the matter silently in his head.

As a child, this silence had been a comfort. It meant Ned was reckoning a way out of his difficulties. As a man, he was less certain.

His brother stared implacably into his port. 'How wise was this move?'

'Devil it, Ned, the move is made. Whether it was wise or not is moot.'

'You engaged in this impulsively.' This was not a question but a statement of fact, a disapproved-of fact.

Devlin put his glass down on a table and faced his immovable brother. 'It is done, Ned, and I need some money to get through to next quarter. Will you give it or not?'

Ned sat in a nearby chair and casually crossed his legs. 'You have been gambling heavily, little brother.'

Devlin knew that was coming. 'As your spies have reported? I do not suppose they were present when I won back my losses?'

Ned's cronies would never have been present at such an unsavoury place as Farley's. If they had, his brother would be discussing what else Devlin won that night.

'I have heard your losses to be steep. This gambling must stop, Devlin.'

If his brother had not ordered him to stop gambling, he might have informed Ned that he'd come to the same conclusion. Now he would not give his brother that satisfaction.

'And what else might I do, Ned? What is there for me to do? The war is over, and I'm damned if I'll go anywhere else in this world to fight. India? Africa? The West Indies? I'm no longer keen on dying on foreign soil.'

Ned swirled his port and tasted the rich, imported liquid. 'It is time you took your rightful place in the family.'

'Rightful place?' Devlin prowled the room. 'What the deuce is my rightful place?'

Calmly his brother spoke, 'You need to assume the control of your estate. It should not fall to our brother Percy, who has enough of his own to oversee.'

‘You know I cannot.’ Devlin glared at him. ‘You and my father saw to that. I cannot take control until I marry. I must subsist on what you obligingly provide me until I marry a suitable woman of whom you approve. Good God! What possessed you and my father to contrive that addle-brained plan?’

‘You know why.’ Ned spoke in the most reasonable voice possible. ‘You lack control. You have always been devil-may-care. Father had the wisdom to know you would cease your wild ways when you had another person dependent upon you. A wife.’

‘Damn it, Ned, would you have me marry merely to get my fortune? Would you have married under that fancy bit of blackmail?’

At least Devlin had the satisfaction of seeing his brother betray emotion. Ned’s cheek twitched. ‘Leave Serena out of this.’

Devlin felt a pang of guilt for speaking of his brother’s marriage. He never knew for certain if his brother loved Serena, though he suspected she loved Ned. When he saw Ned and Serena together, there was such a reserve between them, who could tell? Had Ned married her out of duty? Pity Serena, if he had. Their father was behind the match, of course, and Ned would never have gone against their father’s wishes. Two peas in a pod, his brother and father.

‘I am not speaking of Serena,’ he said more mildly. ‘I am speaking of myself. I have no desire to marry at the moment, but I am more than ready to assume control of my property. Indeed, I long to run it. Let me take the task from Percy and work the farm. I do not give a damn if the rest of the money is under your thumb.’

It would be an ideal solution. Bart and Sophie would fit in neatly on the estate. Madeleine and Linette would be a bit more difficult to situate, but he was sure he could contrive something.

Ned regained his damned composure. ‘Doing so would deprive you of an opportunity to make an advantageous match. The Season has begun and there are all manner of eligible young ladies from whom you may choose.’

Devlin clenched his fist. ‘I have no desire to marry.’

Ned rose and walked to the desk by the window. He fussed with papers stacked there, glancing through them, and re-stacking them. Devlin would have liked to think his brother was considering his proposal, but he suspected Ned was simply showing him who was head of the family.

Ned did not look up from the papers when he spoke. ‘Our father’s wishes will continue to be honoured. You will receive your allotted portion on the quarter, not before. When you marry an acceptable young lady, your estate and your fortune will pass to you, and I will have no more to say of it.’

Devlin leaned down, putting both hands on the desk, forcing his brother to meet his eyes. ‘Both you and Father were mistaken, Ned. You could at least let me work. As it is, you and our dear departed father have deprived me of any responsibility at all and have kept me as dependent as if I were still a schoolboy. Had I something of value to do, I might have reason to be steady. As it is, I have nothing.’

‘You will have everything you desire if you marry.’ Ned spoke through clenched teeth.

‘But I do not wish to marry.’

The two men glared at each other.

Devlin swung away from his brother. ‘You and Father never trusted me to find my own way. You knew, did you not, that he almost refused to purchase my colours?’ He fingered one of the volumes on the shelf. ‘I would have enlisted as a common foot soldier had he done so. Father could not force me to do anything and neither can you, Ned.’

‘You are being foolish, Devlin. This is for your own good. You have always been too wild by half and too wilful to behave with any sense.’

‘You dare to say such a thing to me? Do you forget what I have been doing these past years? Do you think I have been on a lark?’

The Marquess stood. 'I know it killed our father to have you traipsing all over the continent risking your neck.'

Devlin shook with rage. 'Unfair, Ned.'

'You should have been seeing to your duty to the family.' Ned raised his voice.

'I was seeing to my duty to the family. How well do you think the family would have fared under Napoleon?' Devlin matched his brother's volume. 'Go to the devil, Ned.'

Ned stepped from behind the desk and faced his brother. 'Our father worried every day that you would meet your death. Not only during the war, but every day of your sad youth. You have been a rash care-for-nobody and it is past time you became a grown man.'

Devlin clenched his fists, standing nose to nose with his older brother. 'I fought for my life before I ever went to war. To be a man means more than following the dictates of a father who thought he could pull a string and have all his bidding done. When will you assume manhood, Ned? Have you ever had a thought of your own?'

'You are addressing the head of the family, little brother.'

'I am addressing my father. You may as well be him, Ned. You always did whatever he said. You and Percy and our sisters. You all blindly did his bidding. If he said jump, you jumped. If he said marry this young lady, you made the offer.'

'Leave Serena out of this!' Ned's eyes blazed. He shoved hard against Devlin's chest.

Devlin automatically shoved back, his soldier's reflexes operating. With his greater height, youth, and war-honed strength, he knocked his brother to the floor. 'Leave me to live my own life! I will choose when and who I marry.'

'Indeed you shall, you insufferable ingrate.' Ned picked himself off the floor and, to Devlin's surprise, came at him with a swinging fist that connected smartly to Devlin's jaw.

'Deuce,' yelled Devlin, lunging back at him, toppling them both to the floor. They rolled, grunting and punching, knocking down a small table and sending the wine decanter crashing to the floor, red wine splashing.

'Stop this! Stop at once!' Serena cried from the doorway.

The two men paid her no heed. On their feet now, they smashed into a bookcase and books rained down from the shelves. Blood dripped from Ned's nose and Devlin's coat ripped.

'Barclay! Barclay!' Serena screamed for the butler as she ran over to her husband and brother-in-law. She pulled on Devlin's back to get him off Ned.

'Master Devlin. Master Ned.' A voice of authority seemed to boom directly from their childhood. White-haired Barclay entered the room. 'You ought to be ashamed.'

They stopped fighting at once.

Ned recovered first, dabbing his nose with the lace-edged handkerchief Serena offered him. 'Thank you, Barclay. We are quite in control again. Your help is no longer necessary.'

Devlin felt a pain in his stomach that was not the result of a punching fist. How had he wound up brawling with his older brother? He'd seen Percy and Ned in a scrap or two, always carefully kept from their father, but it was unthinkable that he should actually strike this man who'd searched all through the wounded and dying in Brussels until he found his younger brother.

'Ned, I—'

'Enough, Devlin.' The Marquess folded the handkerchief.

Serena looked as if she might swoon at any moment, filling Devlin with more guilt. Her face was pale as she righted the toppled table and tried to pick up the glass fragments. How could he have distressed her like this?

Ned straightened his clothes and brushed himself off. He glanced at his wife. 'Serena, would you leave us, please?'

'I would not wish—' she began.

‘Leave us. We shall not come to further blows.’ Devlin had not thought his brother could speak so softly.

With a worried look at them both, she left the room, one hand covering her mouth.

Ned composed himself and returned to his desk, showing no signs that they had been rolling on the floor moments before. ‘Serena tells me you were in the company of an unchaperoned young woman.’

Devlin rolled his eyes. He might be standing before his father again. Too many times his father ignored what Devlin tried to say and went directly to whatever would hurt him most.

‘Your point, Ned?’

‘Did you introduce my wife to your fancy piece?’

Amazing. Ned managed to provoke his anger again. ‘Ned, I assure you, I would not do anything to embarrass my sister-in-law. I have the highest respect and sympathy for her.’

‘What do you mean “sympathy”?’ Ned sounded ready to punch him again.

‘I meant nothing.’ He meant he was sorry she had not conceived a child, but this was not the time to address Ned on that subject. He had no notion how the wind blew for his brother on that score.

‘Who was the woman you were with? Do you have a lightskirt who costs you?’

Good God. Did Ned wish another jab in the nob? ‘She is an acquaintance who does not deserve your insults.’ Devlin would say no more. He merely wished to get away from his brother. ‘Ned, we have said more than is prudent. I will beg your leave.’

‘Indeed? We have resolved nothing.’ Ned looked like a stranger. No, he looked like their father, not at all like his adored older brother.

‘It doesn’t matter. I will wait for my money to come due.’ He walked to the door.

Ned’s mouth set into a thin, grim line. ‘When your money comes due, it will be half the amount.’

‘What?’

‘Half the amount.’ The Marquess studied his papers before glancing up at Devlin. ‘You need to search for a wife. Perhaps penury will serve as an incentive.’

Devlin fought the rage that erupted inside him. How would he care for Madeleine? How would he feed little Linette? ‘Damn you, Ned. You have no idea what this means.’

‘Remember who is the head of the family, little brother.’

‘I’ll not forget.’ He spoke through his teeth.

Devlin hurried out of the library and almost ran into his sister-in-law, who was walking back and forth in the hall.

‘Devlin, what happened? Why were you fighting?’ she whispered, her voice filled with anxiety.

He stroked her arm. ‘A brothers’ quarrel, nothing more. Do not worry, sister.’

She looked unconvinced. He gave her a long reassuring hug and let her weep against his shoulder a little. ‘It was entirely my fault, Serena. You know how I can provoke Ned. Do not cry.’

The library door opened. An icy voice such as Devlin had never heard said, ‘Unhand my wife and take your leave.’

Chapter Seven

Misery assailed Devlin as he walked through the doorway of Ned's town house. He'd made a mess of things. What a colossal fool, provoking his brother, though he could not precisely remember what he had said to set Ned off. They had disagreed reasonably for a short time. How had he ended up punching Ned in the nose, for deuce's sake?

Worse than bloodying the nose of the Marquess of Heronvale was jeopardising Madeleine's future and that of her child. How would he care for them now?

What a damned coil. What a fool and idiot.

He set a slow pace in the direction of St James's Street.

He ought to have conserved his money, not rented the bigger apartment, not purchased as many lengths of fabric for Sophie, as many toys for Linette. He should not have purchased an entire wardrobe for Madeleine when she argued for only two or three dresses. Most of all, he should not have lost his temper with his brother. He should have remained calm. He should have rehearsed several cogent arguments why his brother should advance him the money. Instead, he'd allowed Ned to goad him until they came to blows.

He might laugh at rousing emotion in his brother, if only the result had not been the halving of his funds. Ned's calm, dispassionate control, so comforting to him as a child, irritated him as a man. To think he used to shake with fear when Ned and Percy pummelled each other with their fists, Ned as out of control as Devlin so often was. It had been like watching the foundations at Heronvale crack and crumble.

This time it was his own would-be estate that crumbled—Edgeworth, twenty miles from Heronvale and ten from Percy's estate. His father had aimed to keep them close, tied to the land that he'd purchased from neighbours who let their property slip through their fingers.

'Land, my boy.' Devlin could hear his father's firm voice, his fist pounding the dinner table. 'If a man has land, he has a future.' His father would gesture to Devlin's plate. 'Land gives you good food and drink to fill your belly. Mind, you have never been hungry in my house.'

True, but Devlin had known hunger on the Peninsula where supplies were often low, and he had known thirst when wounded at Waterloo, waiting twelve hours in the mud to be found.

Devlin was ready for the land his father bequeathed him. Ready for work. He longed for hard physical labour. He yearned to work next to the men in the fields, as he had fought beside their brothers. Wouldn't that give Ned apoplexy!

Devlin stopped in the middle of the pavement and rubbed his brow. What good did it do to think of Edgeworth? He needed to think of Madeleine.

It would not be at all difficult to find positions for Bart and Sophie somewhere in the family. Percy, especially, had a kind heart for a person in need. Indeed, anyone would be fortunate to hire Bart. And, if he knew Bart, the man would care well for Sophie. As for himself, he could plague Ned by visiting one sister after another, never complying with the Heronvale dictates. What prime sport that would be.

But what about Madeleine and Linette? He would go to the devil and drag Ned with him before he'd allow Madeleine to return to the only profession she knew and her daughter with her. Damn, he needed money to save her from that fate. Enough money for her to live comfortably and to rear Linette.

Devlin's mind spun round and round. The only thing he knew with a certainty was that he was a damned fool and had failed the people who depended upon him.

Failed Madeleine.

Too soon he neared the lodgings. With a heavy heart, he turned the knob of the front door.

Madeleine stole a surreptitious glance at Devlin during dinner later that evening. He was unduly quiet. Something troubled him, and she did not know what. Did she even have the right to inquire?

If he were like other men, she would not care what problems he had. But he was not like other men. Would another man be so kind to her daughter? When it had been time for Linette to go to bed, it had to be Devlin to carry her up and tuck her in. For a moment she worried about leaving Linette to a man's care, but that was foolish. Devlin would not harm her.

Indeed, he should not be so kind. It made her feel she could depend on him. It was dangerous to depend upon anyone. They fooled you, then tricked you into doing what they willed.

She cast her gaze on Devlin again, and made an attempt at conversation. 'Did you have a pleasant visit with your brother?'

He glanced up and paused so long she thought he would not answer. 'I spent an agreeable interval with my sister-in-law.'

What did that mean?

'Scrapped with your brother, did you?' Bart snorted. 'That explains your black looks.'

Devlin did not banter back at Bart as was usual. Instead, he rubbed his forehead and stared down at his plate. Madeleine frowned. Bart should leave off scolding this time. Something was indeed wrong.

Sophie, her usual wary expression on her face, popped up to gather the dirty dishes. She had a cat's sense for danger.

Little had been eaten from Devlin's plate. 'Leave the dishes a bit, Sophie. I wish to speak to all of you.'

Madeleine's pulse accelerated. No good news could be forthcoming.

'Let us clear the dishes first,' Madeleine suggested. 'It will be more comfortable.' And it would delay the inevitable.

Devlin released a breath. 'Very well, remove the dishes, but return promptly, if you please.'

'I will help.' Madeleine picked up her own plate and Devlin's.

'I can do it, Maddy,' Sophie said.

'I want to help,' Madeleine countered. She was able to clear dishes, at least. No special skill needed for that. Besides, it helped quiet her nerves to be busy.

Madeleine returned to her seat next to Devlin. He had poured small glasses of port for all of them and his eyes held such a pained expression, the fear rose in her once more.

What other kind of bad news could there be, except she, Linette and Sophie would have to leave? She clenched her hands together in her lap.

Devlin toyed with his glass of port. He cleared his throat. 'I visited my brother to request an advance of the money due me in two months' time. We have wound up a little short—'

'Because of my dresses.' Madeleine moaned, misery and guilt swirling inside her.

He held the glass still. 'Not only your dresses, Maddy. My mismanagement is primarily the blame.'

'Now, lad...' Bart began, an uncharacteristic soothing tone in his voice.

Devlin cleared his throat. 'You see, I had decided the way out of our difficulties was to make the request of my brother. Unfortunately, I had not counted on the Marquess refusing.'

'The man refused?' Bart's thick eyebrows shot up.

'I fear so.'

'No worry, Dev. We shall manage.' Bart nodded his head as if convincing himself as well as the others. 'We can practise some economy. We shall do nicely.'

Devlin gave a dry laugh. 'You have not yet heard the worst of it, my friend. Not only did my brother refuse an advance, he cut my allowance in half. I do not see how we can go on at all.'

Bart's mouth opened. 'Half?'

'What does it mean, Maddy?' Sophie leaned over the table to whisper to her.

‘It means you and Linette and I must leave.’ Madeleine’s hand went to her throat. She thought her words would strangle there.

‘No,’ Devlin protested. ‘It does not mean that.’

‘Oh, perhaps not today,’ she went on. ‘We should have a little time to make other arrangements. Nothing hard-hearted about it.’ Her voice trembled now.

‘Maddy.’ Devlin grabbed her hand. ‘It does not mean you must leave.’

She met his gaze. Along with pain, she saw a tenderness that took her breath away.

‘I do not know how, Maddy, but I will take care of you.’

She blinked.

He turned back to Bart and Sophie. ‘I think I should be able to find you both positions with some member of my family.’

‘I will not leave Maddy,’ Sophie cried.

‘And I will stay with you, lad. We have endured worse than this.’ Bart lifted his glass in a salute. Devlin looked from one to another. ‘We did not have women and a child to care for in those days.’

‘We will take care of ourselves.’ Madeleine lifted her chin in a show of bravado she could not feel.

‘How, Maddy?’ Devlin said. ‘You have no means of income.’

Bart stood and held his glass high. ‘We are in this together, do we agree? We solve it together.’ He stared at them until they all lifted their glasses in return.

‘I could take in laundry,’ Sophie said in a quiet voice.

Devlin laughed. ‘I hope it does not come to that, little one. I thought I might speak to some people I know tomorrow. Perhaps someone can find a use for me.’

‘If there’s labour to be done I can do it,’ Bart said.

Madeleine toyed with her glass. ‘There are three or four men who would pay much for time with me.’

They all stared at her.

‘It should not be difficult, I think. I can give you the names and you can find out how to communicate with them.’

‘Good God, Maddy.’ Devlin’s face drained of colour.

Madeleine gave him a surprised look. ‘It would pay handsomely, I am sure.’

He spoke through clenched teeth. ‘I do not give a deuce how well it would pay, you will not bed other men on my behalf.’

‘Not on your behalf, but for us all.’ He could not prevent her from doing her part, not when she was the cause of the problem.

He slapped his hand on the table. ‘I will hear no more of this.’

Sophie’s eyes grew wider. With a nervous glance, she slipped off the chair and skittered into the kitchen. His arms crossed against his chest, Bart regarded Madeleine and Devlin with a disapproving expression.

Madeleine continued. ‘I believe it would bring in a good sum of money.’

He stood up and leaned over her. ‘No.’ He strode out of the room.

She followed him. ‘Why not?’

He wheeled around to face her. ‘You have to ask?’

‘Devlin, it would not be difficult for me to do this. It is not as if I have not done it before.’

His eyes flashed.

‘What objection can you have? It is the perfect solution.’

‘You will allow me to solve our problems, Maddy. You will not do it by lying on your back.’

He did not need to speak to her in such a crude manner. ‘It is what I do best, if you recall.’

‘Deuce,’ he said. ‘And where shall you perform this lucrative act? In this house? With Linette in the room?’

‘Of course not!’ How dare he suggest such a thing. ‘I have always kept Linette out of the way. Sophie would take her.’

‘Much more proper,’ he said, the corner of his mouth turning down in contempt.

‘I have told you, I am not proper.’

‘And where would Bart and I be? Collecting the money at the door?’

‘Do not be absurd. I cannot talk to you. You do not see reason.’ She stalked off.

How could he not see she must resolve the difficulties she had placed him in? She owed him that much. It was not that she wished to bed anyone, except...except... No, he must recognise how much she was indebted to him. He had rescued her from Farley. For that she would do anything for him. Anything.

She ran up the stairs, but he came right behind. At the top of the stairs, he caught her by the shoulders and spun her around.

‘We will finish this, Madeleine. We will not solve our financial woes in this way, do you hear? You will not speak of this again.’ He dug his fingers into her shoulders.

‘How is it that you could object, Devlin? You know what I am.’ She lowered her voice.

He made a strangled sound. ‘Do you think I wish to think of another man’s hands all over you?’

She stared at him. The hands of many men had touched her.

His fingers slid down her arms. ‘Do you think I could accept money for another man to bed you?’

She swallowed. ‘Farley did.’

‘I am not Farley, Madeleine. I thought you understood that.’

He stood so close, all she needed was to stand on tiptoe and touch her lips to his. She could smell the port on his breath and the taste of it resonated in her mouth. The wish to taste it on him was almost too difficult to bear. He made no move to close the gap between them. It was clearly her choice.

His hands rested gently on her arms. Those hands had once caressed her bare skin. She craved the joy and terror of his body joined to hers. Her feet arched and raised her higher. He uttered a guttural sound and closed the gap between them, his mouth plundering as if he were a man starved. Her own hunger surged as she pressed herself against him and wound her arms around his neck. His lips travelled to her neck, sending sensations straight to her soul.

She wanted him again with all the wantonness of her wretched body. The body that had betrayed her and led to her deserved ruin. She had learned to erase all thought and all feeling in order to play the role Farley bid her play, but Devlin made her tremble with longing. He tore away the safety of her detachment.

She struggled to speak. ‘Do you want me, Devlin?’ Her voice sounded more controlled than she felt. ‘Do you wish to bed me?’

He stilled. Straightening, his eyes narrowed. Her knees began to shake as his silence grew longer.

Finally, he spoke, his tone cold. ‘Am I able to afford you, Miss M?’

He turned and hurried down the stairs and out the front door.

At the town house in Grosvenor Square, the Marquess of Heronvale pushed food around his plate. The cavernous dining room echoed with the clink of his silver fork against the china.

He glanced at his wife. She looked absorbed in her own thoughts, the corners of her eyes pinched with unhappiness. A ball of misery sat in his stomach where food should have been.

He had disappointed her once again, more inventively this time. Indeed, rolling on the floor, trading punches with his youngest brother could hardly have lowered him further in her estimation. Especially since he had lost the fight.

Humiliating.

She had probably championed Devlin, in any event. He could not blame her. She was at ease with his brother in a way she was not with him. There was so little emotion between Serena and himself he would have been surprised if she had taken his side. Serena undoubtedly would think him too severe with Devlin, that a marquess should wield his power with more compassion.

But Devlin had infuriated him with those comments about his wife. Success with women came as easy to Devlin as riding, shooting, gaming. His youngest brother did everything without effort, as well as without thought, while he, the bearer of the title, had laboured for every accomplishment.

How well he remembered Devlin's birth. He had been home on school holiday, old enough at ten years to take charge of Percy, Helen, Julia, and Lavinia during his mother's confinement. He smiled inwardly at his less-than-learned explanation to his sisters and brother of exactly what would transpire during the birth. From the moment he'd held the newborn baby in his arms, Ned had been full of pride in this littlest brother. He made a solemn oath, that day, to always protect and defend him.

Devlin had made keeping that vow a challenge. A more reckless individual had never been born. It had been no surprise to Ned that Devlin joined the cavalry. Had Ned not been heir, he might have served his country as well, fighting at his brother's side, but all he could do was bring a near-dying Devlin back home.

'Ned? Is something troubling you?' Serena's sweet voice broke through his reverie.

'What?'

'I thought you might be troubled.' She averted her eyes.

'No, I am not.' She would think him weak, for certain, if she knew his thoughts.

'I beg your pardon,' she murmured.

He wished more to beg pardon of her, for his abominable behaviour, but did not know quite how. It seemed to him the silence between them was a condemnation.

'You disapprove of my dealings with my brother,' he blurted out.

Her eyebrows flew up in surprise. 'I would not question your judgement.'

'You think me too harsh.'

'I would not presume...'

He dismissed her words with a shake of his head. With trembling fingers, she picked daintily at her food.

After eight years of marriage, his wife remained a stunningly beautiful woman, her restraint the epitome of what became a lady. He could not complain. She was biddable, even when he pressed his carnal urges upon her, something he did as rarely as he could tolerate. The marital act was too painful for her sensibilities, but she craved children and he wished to give them to her.

Another failure on his part.

Ned drained the wine from his glass for the third time. 'Do you go out tonight, Serena?'

She jumped at the sound of his voice and barely glanced at him. 'No.'

It was his turn to be surprised. She had lately developed the habit of accompanying friends to the evening entertainments, the ones from which he begged off with increasing frequency.

She pressed her fingertips against her temple. 'I shall retire early. I...I have the headache.'

He had made her ill. He poured another glass of wine, wanting to express his concern, to offer to get her headache powders, to escort her up to her room and help her into bed.

He did none of those things.

'If you will excuse me...'

She rose and, without waiting for a reply and probably not expecting one, left him alone in the room.

A footman entered and moved quickly to clear the table. Ned gestured for him to take away the plate from which he had barely eaten. When the man set the brandy in front of him, Ned began to see how much of that bottle he could finish.

Chapter Eight

Devlin picked a secluded chair at White's far from the bow window. He intended to sip his brandy in peace, away from the curious passers-by in the street. He wished to steel himself before circulating among the gentlemen of the ton in another attempt to procure employment. But what reason was there to expect this afternoon to differ from the last two weeks? He had made inquiries with the few of his senior officers still alive and exploited every imaginable family connection.

He might as well have bivouacked in a field. In fact, he would have preferred it, sharing cold, damp nights and bawdy soldier's tales with men who knew life could end with a musket ball the next day.

'May I join you?'

Devlin glanced up. The elegant figure of the Marquess stood before him. He shrugged his assent.

His brother signalled for a drink and settled in the comfortable chair across from him. 'How do you go on, Devlin?'

How did Ned think he went on? He and Bart had counted every coin that morning. They had a few days' escape from the River Tick, no more.

'Tolerably well,' he said.

Ned regarded him with a bland expression. What lay beyond that inscrutable countenance was a mystery. Devlin could wait out the silence, even if his brother never spoke.

Ned did not betray a thought, let alone a feeling. 'I understand you have inquired about employment around town.'

Devlin cocked his head, ever so slightly.

The waiter placed a glass before Ned. 'Without success, I recollect.'

Devlin favoured him with an ironic grin. 'I am pleased you are so well informed. Unfortunately, there seems to be a surplus of men such as myself. Soldiers needing work.'

'A pity.' Ned raised his glass to his lips.

'It does not help that the men from whom I seek employment instead contrive to introduce me to their daughters.'

'Indeed?'

Damn his brother's implacability. 'It was not you who spread the tale of our father's peculiar arrangement for me?'

Ned's eyes flickered with surprise, not guilt.

Devlin laughed. 'Not you, I collect. A sister, perhaps?'

Ned's control returned. 'Helen is a likely suspect.'

'Likely,' Devlin agreed. 'She has a crony in town, I believe.'

'And meddling proclivities.'

For a moment the ease between them returned and Devlin could almost forget that his revered brother had unwittingly placed a young woman and her innocent daughter in jeopardy. Ned would disapprove if he knew of Madeleine, but would he be less tight-fisted? Pride prevented Devlin from revisiting his monetary request on his brother. He was less sure why he did not confide about Madeleine.

'How is Serena?' he asked instead, seeking neutral ground.

The Marquess's eyes narrowed. 'Well.'

Serena was not neutral ground, then. Had Ned's anger something to do with Serena? Devlin studied him. The Marquess's bland expression had a hard edge.

'Good God, Ned. Is there some trouble between you and Serena?' The sudden thought burst into words.

Ned's face turned to chiselled granite. 'Mind your loose tongue. Your voice will carry.'

'I am sorry,' Devlin mumbled. Deuce, he had managed to blunder into more disfavour. If others had heard his ill-conceived words, the rumour-mill would carry the tale throughout the ton. He glanced around the room, but no one seemed to have given them the least heed. He hoped.

Ned had not looked around, but maintained his damnable composure. What a soldier he would have made, thought Devlin. He would bet Ned could face down a battalion single-handed without flinching. But would he be able to muster enough emotion to strike? A soldier eventually had to tap into rage. Until their fisticuffs of a fortnight ago, Devlin would not have believed Ned capable of rage.

Devlin felt light-headed. He ought not to have imagined battle. Images, sounds, and smells enveloped him. The thud of horses' hooves, the cry of battle, the smoke and smell of musket fire. Men screamed. Horses squealed. Metal clanged against metal before thrusting into flesh. Blood sprayed and the stench of death grew stronger.

Devlin pressed his fingers to his temple.

'Are you unwell?' Ned's voice held genuine concern.

Beads of perspiration dampened his forehead, as if the day had not been cool. The incessant thunder of French cannon echoed through his brain and his vision blurred into smoke-filled chaos. He could see the men, the shapes of their noses, the yellowed colour of their teeth, the stunned expressions as his own sabre sliced their throats.

'Dev, you are white as death. Let me summon a doctor.'

At his brother's voice, the images dissolved as suddenly as they had come, leaving his emotions in tattered pieces. Devlin suppressed an urge to laugh. As in childhood, his brother had rescued him, this time from his own personal demons.

'No doctor.' Devlin's voice was not quite steady. 'I was woolgathering for a moment.' He stood. All notions of grovelling for employment fled. 'Would you excuse me, Ned? I must leave.'

The brow of the Marquess wrinkled slightly. 'Are you sure you are not ill?'

Devlin's mouth lifted at the corner. 'Poor, perhaps, but not ill. You needn't worry.'

'I have my barouche. I will take you home.'

'Not necessary, brother. The walk will do me good.' His heart still pounded and his hands trembled. All Devlin wished to do was flee. He touched Ned on the shoulder and hurried away.

A light rainfall greeted him on the street and he closed his eyes for a moment, savouring the cool droplets pattering on his upturned face.

'Good day, Steele. Been at White's, I see.'

Devlin opened his eyes and met the affable grin of Lord Farley. He merely nodded and made to continue on his way.

Farley put a hand on his arm. 'Pray, what is your hurry? Come with me to my establishment. I shall buy you a drink.'

'I think not.' Again Devlin tried to leave.

'Come. You may give me news of Madeleine,' he persisted.

Devlin shrugged off the man's hand. 'I think not.'

Anger flashed through Farley's eyes for a moment before the amiable expression reappeared. 'How does she go on? I hope she still pleases you, but perhaps you have tired of her.'

Devlin's emotions were ragged enough to plant his fist squarely in the centre of Farley's face. He pushed past.

The man fell in step with him. 'I say, Steele, I hear you are seeking employment. Consider working for me. I could use a skilled gamester, and, I promise you, I would compensate you generously. I am again flush in the pockets, you see.'

Devlin stopped, his fingers still curled into fists. He'd heard the tale of Farley's change in fortune. 'Tell me, would my employment include fleecing green boys—like young Boscomb? He put a pistol to his head after a visit to your tables, did he not?'

Farley's eyes narrowed but his grin remained. 'An unfortunate incident.'

Devlin attempted to walk on, but Farley kept pace. 'Perhaps, if you are in need of funds, you would return Madeleine to me. In return for the money you won from me, of course.'

Devlin's fists tightened. If he'd had his sword in his hand, he would relish the sound of its steel plunging into Farley's gut. Devlin gritted his teeth. 'Do not speak of her.'

'Oh?' Farley remarked casually. 'She has become troublesome to you, perhaps? She has a habit of doing so. I assure you, I know precisely how to deal with her.'

Devlin spun toward Farley and, with the strength of both arms, shoved him away. Better that than attacking and killing him. Farley fell, splashing into a puddle on the pavement.

Farley struggled to rise. 'You have ruined my coat.'

Devlin leaned over him. 'I'll ruin more than your coat if you dare speak to me again, Farley.'

He turned his back and crossed the street, not heeding the stares of others walking by.

Madeleine stood in the hall, pushing the broom here and there, wondering how one contrived to get all the dust into one spot so that one could use the dustpan. She decided to experiment on a little pile of dust, but couldn't work out how to hold the broom and the dustpan at the same time. Linette sat in the corner galloping her wooden horse back and forth, while her doll sat abandoned on a parlour chair.

Bart had accompanied Sophie to the dress shop. How could any of them have guessed that little Sophie would be the only one to find paying work? Bart searched each day for labour, coming home talking of scores of veterans like himself lining up for one job. And Devlin. More lines of worry etched his face each day.

When Madeleine and Sophie took some of her new dresses to the dressmaker in the hope that they might return them, Sophie came home with a large package of piecework, Madeleine with the dresses she had sought to sell.

She struggled with the sweeping. She was determined to do her part. While Sophie sewed and Bart and Devlin searched for work, she would care for the house.

Madeleine tried a different way to hold the broom, sticking it under her arm and levering it against her hip. She pretended to be a simple country housewife. She cleaned the house and tended the child while her husband—Devlin, of course—tilled the earth. Their lives were a quiet routine of hard work, peaceful evenings in front of the fireplace, and nights filled with loving. Madeleine leaned on the broom and sighed. How wonderful it would be.

She should not waste time in fancy. This silly habit of hers did not do her credit. She needed to solve her problems such as they really were. She needed work. Employment as a housemaid would not be the means, she supposed, although housework had never seemed difficult for the housemaids she once knew. They sped through chores with no apparent effort.

She jabbed at her pitiful pile of dust with the broom, scattering it everywhere except into the dustpan. 'Deuce.'

As she uttered this unladylike but Devlin-like epithet, the door opened and Devlin walked in, his head bent and his shoulders stooped. When he saw her, he smiled, but his eyes remained sad. 'What the devil are you doing?'

'Sweeping.' She looked down at the floor. 'Or trying to do so.'

'Deddy!' Linette popped up from her corner and propelled herself into Devlin's arms.

'How's my little lady?'

Linette wrapped her little arms around Devlin's neck. 'Deddy play?' She batted long lashes and smiled sweetly.

'Not now, Lady Lin.' He put Linette down and the child ran back to her toy horse. Devlin rubbed his forehead. He turned toward Madeleine and again smiled.

She stepped over to him to take his hat. 'You are wet.'

'It is nothing. A little rain.'

‘Let me help you remove your coat.’ She reached for the lapels. He held her arms and stared at her a moment before clutching her to him.

She could hardly breathe, he held her so tight.

‘Do not worry so, Devlin. We shall come about.’ She wound her own arms around his neck.

Linette ran to them, arms raised. ‘Me! Me!’

Devlin scooped her up and enveloped them both in a hug, the kind of coming-home greeting she had imagined a moment ago, but infused with pain instead of pleasure.

‘Come into the kitchen, Devlin. I’ll make you a cup of tea.’ She liked the sound of that, the housewife giving comfort to the labourer.

‘I want biskis!’ Linette cried.

Devlin, holding them both more loosely now, gave her a perplexed look. ‘Biskis?’

‘She means biscuit. I believe we still have a good number that Sophie made.’

He smiled. ‘Tea and biskis it is, then.’ Still carrying Linette, he followed her into the kitchen.

Bart and Sophie entered from the rear door as Madeleine poured Devlin’s tea. Devlin merely raised his eyebrows to Bart, who shook his head.

‘These are hard times.’ The sergeant frowned.

Madeleine bade Bart and Sophie sit for tea and ‘biskis’, and, amid Sophie’s protests, she served them all. Linette had climbed upon Devlin’s lap. While the others traded news of their efforts of the day, she surveyed the scene. Their situation was dire, but the moment filled her with peace.

Her family, she thought. She put a hand to her brow. She must not think of family.

‘Perhaps I have something of value to sell,’ Devlin mused. ‘I must have a stick pin or something with a jewel in it. Or perhaps my sword would fetch a good price.’

‘You must keep the sword.’ Bart nodded his head firmly. ‘To honour the others.’

‘You are right.’ Devlin’s voice was barely audible.

‘I could try another shop to sell the dresses,’ Madeleine offered.

He winced. ‘Yes, you could.’

Sophie rose and dropped a few coins into Devlin’s hands. ‘My earnings, sir.’

Madeleine watched the look of pain flash over his face, replaced by a gentle smile for Sophie.

‘Thank you, indeed, little one. This is a welcome contribution.’

Sophie flushed with pride.

He stood, having drained the contents of his cup and set Linette upon a chair. ‘If you all will pardon me.’

Madeleine watched him walk out of the room, his tall figure ramrod straight. A moment later the front door closed.

Later that evening when she was putting Linette to bed, she heard Devlin’s footsteps on the stairs. He entered his bedchamber. Half-listening for sounds from his room, she sang softly to her sleepy daughter. Within a few minutes, the child’s eyelids fluttered closed. She kissed Linette’s soft, pink brow, tucked the covers around her, and tiptoed over to the chest. Quietly opening the top drawer, she removed a small package wrapped in cloth.

Madeleine tapped lightly at the connecting door between her room and Devlin’s. Without waiting for an answer, she entered.

He sat on the edge of his bed, bare-chested, his elbows resting on his knees, his hands clasped together. He glanced up.

‘May I speak with you, Devlin?’

He nodded.

She walked over to the bed, handed him her parcel.

‘What is this?’ He took it in his hand.

‘Something for you to sell.’

He unwrapped the cloth and lifted a delicate gold chain with a teardrop pearl. In the cloth were matching pearl earrings.

‘These are lovely. Where did you get them? From Farley?’

‘No,’ she said, indignant that he should think so. ‘They were mine before I met Farley. You may sell them.’

He stared at the jewellery and at her. ‘Not quite yet, Maddy. Keep them for now.’

She carefully rewrapped the package.

‘I have been thinking.’ He rubbed his hands together. ‘I have depended upon all of you too long. Poor Sophie, her fingers sore from sewing. You, ready to sell your treasures. Bart, searching for labour I’d not ask an enemy to perform.’

She stroked his cheek. ‘I have caused you this trouble.’

He clasped her hand and held it.

Suddenly shy under his gaze, she glanced down. Her eyes rested on his chest and widened. ‘Devlin, you have scars.’

His torso was riddled with them. Now, thinking about it, she realised she’d felt rough areas on his chest, that day she had touched him and almost made love with him. She had not looked, however. Now, so close to him in the candlelight, she recognised the long scar from the injury in Spain, but there were so many others, short and jagged.

‘It is repulsing, is it not?’ he said.

She touched one of the scars with her finger. ‘Oh, Devlin, how could you think such a thing?’ With gentleness, she traced it, still pink from healing. ‘What happened to you? How did it come about that you have so many?’

‘Waterloo.’

She placed her palm against his firm chest. ‘I know it was at Waterloo. I should like to hear what happened to you.’

He rose, walking over to his window. ‘The tale is not fit for fair ears.’

‘Fustian. Nothing about me is fair.’ She followed him. Standing behind him, she marked the scars on his back with her fingers. ‘You had to endure this. It cannot be worse for me to hear of it.’

He turned to face her. She placed her hands on his shoulders as he gazed at her. The green of his eyes turned soft as moss. ‘I have a proposition for you, Miss England.’

She stiffened, pulled away, but he held her firm.

‘Not that kind of proposition.’ He took her chin between his thumb and fingers. His expression turned serious again. ‘I will tell you about Waterloo on one condition.’

‘What condition?’ She could imagine no other condition but bedding him. He meant a proposition, after all, no matter how he coloured it. When he touched her like this, she dared hope for it.

He gave her a light kiss on the lips, which merely gave her an urge to kiss him harder in return. ‘I will tell you about Waterloo, if you tell me about how you came to be with Farley.’

She pulled away and rubbed her arms. ‘Nonsense. I told you already that he seduced me. What else is there to tell?’

He crossed the room and picked up the cloth wrapping her necklace and earrings. ‘I want to know how a girl who owned these came to be in Farley’s gaming hell.’

She turned away. She had never spoken of her past to anyone, not even Sophie. In fact, she chastised herself if even a thought of the past invaded her mind.

She faced him. ‘Very well, I will tell you, but not this night. I do not wish to speak of it this night.’

‘You have a bargain, Maddy.’ He returned to her, kissing her on the cheek. ‘I do not wish to speak of any of it tonight.’

The chaste kiss disappointed her. She wished something else from him. She wished to pretend she was the farmer's housewife readying for bed with her husband. There was no Farley, no Waterloo, no shortage of money. Just days full of useful toil and nights filled with love.

He walked back to the window and stared out at the street for countless minutes. She knew not whether to stay or leave, but she did not want to leave him, especially with the weight of all their problems on his shoulders.

'Sophie is teaching me to sew.' Her voice sounded foolish in the face of his troubled silence.

But he turned to regard her with a kind look in his eye. 'That is very well. Had you not learned before?'

'Oh, I was taught, but I did not heed the lessons.'

He chuckled. 'Your head too full of horses?'

She smiled. 'Sadly, you are right. I never could keep my mind on much else.'

He sat on the window seat, his long legs stretched out before him. 'I know precisely what you mean.'

She sat next to him, tucking her legs beneath her and leaning against him. His arm circled around her shoulders. 'It is a pity that I could not procure employment in a stable. I could do all manner of things there.' She sighed.

He became silent again, and she struggled to think of some other topic to converse upon. She rested her hand on his knee and in a moment, he covered it with his own warm, strong hand.

'No, I shall find the way,' he murmured.

She snuggled against him, the moment acutely precious.

Devlin lifted his hand to her hair, stroking gently. Her locks felt like spun silk beneath his fingers. He inhaled the faint scent of lavender in her hair, and recalled that fragrance from his first meeting of her. After Waterloo, when fever made him delirious and his sisters bathed his forehead with lavender water, his Miss England swam through his dreams.

He had never expected to see her again, and here she was, more wonderful than he could have believed.

He snuggled her closer. She tilted her face to him, the pupils of her eyes wide, her pink lips moist and irresistible.

He kissed her, tasting the sweetness of her, wanting to remove every pain and care from her life and resolving once again to do so. No matter what he must bear.

As his lips gently rested against hers, she whispered, 'Devlin, I...'

He moved to the tender skin beneath her ear.

'I will make love to you, Devlin.'

He stopped and searched her face. 'Only if you truly wish it.'

She cast her gaze down. 'I do wish it. I know it is wicked of me.'

Lifting her chin with his finger, he forced her to meet his eye. 'It is not wicked.'

'But it is,' she insisted. 'I know it is.'

'Well, then, I must be damned indeed.' He ran his lips over her brow. 'I wish that much to make love with you.'

Her face flushed pink. 'It is different for a man.'

'And how is it different, sweet goose?' He pulled the pins from her hair, freeing it to tumble over her shoulders.

'It is no shame for a man to take his pleasure.' Her countenance was solemn. 'Men even boast of it.'

The truth of her words shamed him.

He drew his fingers through her hair. 'Women are made to feel the pleasure, too, Maddy. They are merely expected not to speak of it.'

‘Do you truly believe so?’ Her wide eyes made her appear as innocent as a young virgin. As she must have been, before Farley.

He smiled. ‘I do indeed.’

She gazed at him, a dreamy look on her face.

‘Come.’ He led her to the bed.

She followed almost shyly, like a bride on her first night. He was determined that she should feel every pleasure he could provide for her. He wanted to show her that lovemaking could be beautiful. Enlightening. Forgiving.

He undid the laces of her dress and gently peeled the cloth from her skin. She released a long breath. Next came her corset. As he pulled her shift over her head, she raised her arms, bringing them down again around his neck. Clinging tightly to him, she kissed him.

Though he throbbled to mate with her that instant, he kept his kiss light. He sensed she also could succumb to the passion of the moment, but he held her back. All she’d known was frenzied, impersonal coupling. He wished to show her more. He wished to show her love.

And he wished to savour each moment of it.

She unfastened his trousers and slid her hands under the cloth until she’d pushed them down to his ankles. As she stood again, she slid her hands up his legs, torso, and shoulders, nearly causing him to abandon his resolve to proceed slowly. He captured her hands in his own and tasted her lips at leisure.

Lifting her on to the bed, he settled beside her, letting his eyes drift down the naked length of her.

Miss England, he had called her that first time, half in jest. She was still so very much like the homeland he loved. Peaceful and pleasing. Exciting and teasing.

He slid his tongue down her neck and covered the rose of her nipple with his mouth. She moaned and arched toward him.

Not yet, Miss England, he thought. This must be a journey with so languid a pace every part would be savoured and committed to memory.

As dawn tried to poke its fingers through the thick morning mist, Devlin sat in shirt and trousers, staring out the window. Madeleine rolled over in the bed, making endearingly incoherent sounds as she did so. His attention shifted to her.

Her beauty took his breath away, as it had that first moment he’d seen her in Farley’s gaming hell. Her dark hair such a contrast to her fair skin; her long eyelashes, so like Linette’s, full against the pink of her cheeks. He memorised her image, just as he had done before returning to Spain.

The eyelashes fluttered and she opened her eyes. The smile she gave him, so peaceful and satisfied, tugged at his heart.

He would see that peace stay with her forever, no matter what the cost to him.

‘Good morning,’ she said, sleep making her voice raspy.

‘Did you sleep well?’ He already knew her reply. While he had hardly captured two winks all night long, she had slept as sound as a kitten.

‘Indeed.’ She stretched, arching her back and extending her arms above her head. ‘And I have the feeling that this will be a lucky day. Today you will find the solution to our problems.’

‘I have done so already.’

She brightened, sitting up straight. ‘You thought of it in your sleep?’

Sleep, indeed. ‘I thought of it last night, but I only decided this morning.’

She sprang from the bed and rushed over to climb into his lap. With her arms around him, she rested her head against his chest. ‘What is the solution, Devlin?’

He closed his eyes. As if lances were piercing his skin again, he steeled himself against the pain.

‘I must marry.’

Chapter Nine

Madeleine's heart pounded. Marriage had figured too prominently in her fantasies of late.

'It was my father's plan.' Devlin's voice vibrated through her body, but it did not soothe. 'And it is the only means I have of solving our problems.'

He held her more tightly. 'You see, Maddy, I am a wealthy man. My father bequeathed me a fortune, as he did my sisters and second brother. Ned, of course, has the title and all the entailed property and is as rich as Croesus, but my father saw that each of us would prosper.'

'I do not understand. You are wealthy, but your brother refuses you money?' He made no sense.

He laughed drily. 'There is the rub. My father thought me unfit for my property and wealth. Ned controls the lot until I marry a lady of whom he approves.'

She buried her face into his chest so he would not see. Her fantasies had indeed been foolish. He must marry someone of whom his brother approved. A lady such as the beautiful Marchioness. Not one who came as the prize in a game of cards.

She took a deep breath. 'So you must marry.'

'Marriage shall steady me...or so Father believed. I have resisted, Maddy. It seems an abominable reason to marry.' He squeezed her, his strength conveying his frustration. 'It is too soon for me, in any event. I have just done being a soldier. I do not wish—' He broke off.

Madeleine pulled away and retrieved her clothes from the floor. Suddenly conscious of her nakedness and ashamed of even more that that, she donned her shift, aware of his eyes upon her. She glanced at him and he averted his gaze. Tossing her hair over one shoulder, she slipped into her dress and fumbled with the laces. Devlin came and tied them for her, the light touch of his fingers sending shimmers of pleasure down her back.

'It is because of me...' She felt sick inside, unsure if it was because Devlin would once again pay the price for her freedom, or because he might think of bedding her, but never, never would he think of marrying her. 'I will not allow it.'

'You have no choice.' His voice was bleak.

'I could leave here.' She set her chin firmly. 'You would not need to marry, then.'

He turned her around and held her arms firmly, forcing her to look at him. 'You would be driven back to Farley. Or worse. Believe it, there can be worse.'

'I will never go back to him.' She shuddered at the thought. 'I will find employment. I am already learning to sew.'

He regarded her with tenderness. 'Yes. I am proud of your efforts, but, even if you attain Sophie's skill, it is but a pittance to earn. I counted her money, you recall.'

'I will contrive something.'

'No, you will not. I have been around this in my mind in all manner of ways.' He released a ragged breath. 'I must marry.'

Someone else. Some other woman. A lady.

'You are not responsible for me,' she continued, struggling to keep the misery at bay.

He brushed a lock of hair off her forehead. 'But I am, Maddy. I am responsible for the lot of you.'

'I could walk out. You could not stop me.' She glared.

He shook his head. 'Do not be foolish. You must think of Linette.'

She closed her eyes. He was correct. She would sell her soul to spare Linette a future like hers.

Pulling away, she went to Devlin's bed and smoothed the covers they had disordered, trying not to recall the wanton pleasure of loving him. Her carnal pleasure had come at great cost.

He spoke from behind her. 'I will see to both of you, Maddy. A snug little house for you. Whatever you want. School for Linette. I will make her future secure, and you will not want for

anything.’ He turned her around to face him. ‘It is the only way. I will not permit you and Linette to suffer.’

His countenance, so sincere, with a look so loving, caused tears to prick her eyelids. ‘I cannot like being a burden to you,’ she said lamely.

He gathered her in his arms, holding her tightly against his chest. ‘You will never be a burden. My wealth is such that I may easily afford to provide you and Linette a life of ease.’ He took a deep breath and his chest rose tighter against her. ‘But I must have a wife to do so.’

He would be that rich? But he had been satisfied to count pennies and seek common employment. Why had he done so?

Her mind seized on an anxious thought. ‘Is there a woman for whom you have already spoken?’

He petted her hair. ‘No, my sweet, there is no one else.’

She glanced up at him. His green eyes were soft, though tiny lines of worry etched their corners. She lifted her fingers to feel the rough stubble of his beard. Her childish fantasy of a pirate whisking her away flashed through her mind. Would that it could be true, that this unshaven, half-dressed, hot-blooded man would whisk her away. Not send her away, as fate decreed.

His eyes darkened with passion. Adjusting his hold on her, he captured her lips. The kiss, rough and as yearning as her heart, sent fire through her. She uttered a deep, needful sound and grasped at his shirt, wanting to tear it away from where her hands longed to touch.

His hands untied the laces of her dress as he backed the two of them against the bed. She let her dress slip to the floor, not caring if she stepped on it. He lifted her on to the bed and moved back to rid himself of the shirt and unfasten his trousers. She lifted her shift. He climbed atop her and she relished the weight and nearness of him. His male scent filled her nostrils along with the more primitive smell of desire.

He kissed her again and she arched to him, wanting to join with him, the need more urgent now that she knew this golden time with him would end. She whispered for him to proceed with haste, and he made ready to comply.

‘Mama!’ Linette’s plaintive cry sounded through the door.

‘Deuce,’ Devlin muttered.

‘I have to see to her.’ Madeleine said, fighting her body’s craving to do otherwise.

‘I know.’ Devlin sighed and moved off her, grabbing her dress, which she hurriedly donned. He worked the laces as she headed for the door.

He stopped her at the door with a quick, regretful kiss. ‘See to the child. I’ll come below stairs soon.’

With one glance back, Madeleine opened the door to her room and headed for the outstretched chubby arms of her daughter.

Devlin dragged his hand through his hair and stared at mother and child, desire still churning through him. He closed his eyes and took deep breaths. Arousal faded little, but calm did not return.

He watched Madeleine tend to her child with confidence, efficiency, and calm good humour. How could she manage that when his body still throbbed with wanting her?

Lord, he did not want to leave her when their passion flamed like this. Marrying would not have to cause this to end, would it? He could continue to visit her, still warm her bed.

He quietly shut the door.

No, he would not see her again after the damned marriage. It would be too cruel to this hapless future wife for their marriage to include a mistress.

The wretched course he had decided upon was the correct one. The only one. But it sickened him all the same. To damn another lady to a future without love merely to secure his fortune was detestable, but not to do so meant damning Madeleine and her child to a living hell.

He prowled the room, unable to quiet the storm of emotion inside. He must give up Madeleine. It was the only way to ensure her a good life. Marriage was his only choice.

The walls of the room closed in on him, and his breathing quickened. He shut his eyes and yearned for escape, for freedom.

Until Waterloo, soldiering had been his freedom. Living by his own wits with men who understood what was essential in life. Making the most of each day. Grateful for food, shelter, the occasional warmth of a willing woman. Laughing and drinking and sleeping under the stars. Surging with excitement, raging against the enemy. Testing skill, courage and luck. He would trade everything to go back to those days in Spain.

What blithering nonsense. Those days had vanished with Waterloo.

A heavy fatigue overtook him, but he proceeded to shave and dress. He would put the best face he could on this day, for Madeleine's sake.

Below stairs, he walked past the dining room and smiled. Their little household rarely supped at the table there, except for the last meal of the day. He liked the informality of the kitchen where they gathered as equals in this venture to survive.

That would vanish, too, with his decision. When his money flowed again, he would be master.

As he neared the kitchen door he heard Madeleine's voice.

'Sit, Sophie. Please do. I will tend to the meal.'

Sophie's inevitable protest dissolved into a fit of coughing.

Madeleine looked up as he entered. Linette clambered over the chairs to get to him.

'Deddy!' The little girl jumped into Devlin's arms.

'Devlin,' Madeleine said, 'please tell Sophie to sit and allow me to do the work. She is ill.'

'I am not ill.' The little maid, sallow-faced with dark circles under her eyes, choked on her words and turned her head to cough some more.

Devlin opened his mouth, but had no chance to speak.

'I cannot see how she fooled Bart. He never would have gone out had he known.' Madeleine fussed at putting bowls on the table.

'Deddy play?' Linette batted her long lashes at Devlin.

Madeleine whirled to the child. 'No, Linette, sit here and eat.' She swept over and took the child from Devlin's arms.

She put Linette back in her chair, raised high by a wooden box upon which Linette now stood, not sat. Madeleine continued, 'Dev, please do something. Sophie will not listen to me.'

As if to prove Madeleine's words, Sophie pushed her hands on the table to raise herself. Devlin pressed his fingers to his brow.

'All of you, sit!' he commanded.

The three sat, like obedient soldiers.

He glared from one to the other. 'Linette, do as your mother says. Eat. Maddy, stop fussing. If you wish to ready the meal then bloody do it.' He softened his voice for Sophie. 'Little one, do not exert yourself. It is foolishness when Maddy is capable of a simple breakfast.'

Sophie did as she was told, coughing softly, eyes downcast.

Madeleine rose to pour a cup of tea for Sophie and Devlin. 'You need not have snapped at me.'

He glanced at her, regretting his burst of temper, but her eyes held the hint of a smile and a softer expression that spoke of what had passed between them the previous night.

'I apologise.' His eyes held hers for that moment. He hoped she knew he was sorry for more than a fit of temper.

Between coughs, Sophie said, 'I need to tend to my sewing.'

Madeleine started to protest, but Devlin shot her a glance to keep quiet. She spooned him a bowl of porridge.

'You need sew no longer, little one. We have had a change in fortune. In fact, I intend to return your earnings to you.'

Sophie's eyes grew wide. 'We have money?'

‘We will by this afternoon, I expect. I will call on my brother again. He will give me the money this time.’ He cautiously took a spoonful of the lumpy porridge. Perhaps by the morrow they would be feasting on boiled eggs and ham.

‘You see, I will do as my brother wishes and he will advance me the money.’ Devlin would leave further explanation of their change in fortune to Madeleine, not knowing how to tell Sophie about his need to marry.

‘May...may I continue with the sewing?’ Sophie asked, her eyes darting warily.

He leaned to her and placed his hand on her arm. ‘You may do whatever you wish. I do shout and bluster, but you are a free woman, Sophie. Not mine to command.’

Madeleine stood behind him with the pot of tea. She brushed against him as she poured.

‘Where the devil is Bart?’

‘Gone to find work,’ Madeleine said.

‘Deuce, you did not stop him?’

‘He left before I came down.’

Bart would be out searching for some sort of back-breaking labour, or something so dangerous, only a few of the out-of-work war veterans would compete for the job.

‘He went to a lead factory in Islington,’ Sophie said, before a cough stopped her.

‘When?’

She held her throat, as if that would hold back another coughing spell. ‘An hour or more, I think.’

He could hire a hack and catch up to him. Devlin took a quick sip of his tea and rushed off to warn his sergeant not to risk his neck another time for Devlin’s sake.

He found Bart at the factory door where he and others hung about, hoping to be chosen for a job. The factory billowed black smoke and flecks of black ash covered the pavement and buildings. How could anyone abide such dismal surroundings?

‘Come on, Bart. Let us get you out of this damned place.’ He gestured his friend over to the hack.

Bart did not leave his place in the ragged line that had formed. ‘It is honest work, Dev, and pays well.’

‘You no longer need to break your back. Our fortunes have changed.’

Bart stared at him, hands on his waist. After a moment he abandoned the line and walked over to the hack.

Devlin explained the whole business as they rode back. Bart responded with a grim expression. ‘It is right enough, Dev, but I do not like it all the same.’ He shot Devlin a suspicious glance. ‘Are you certain you have thought this through?’

Devlin nodded, frowning. ‘This is not one of my impulsive acts. I have sat up half the night figuring this. We are mere days from having no blunt at all. What else can we do?’

The two men stared at the buildings passing by, the only sounds the horses’ hooves on the cobblestones and the shouts of vendors selling their wares.

‘When the time comes,’ Devlin said at last, ‘I want you to stay with Madeleine.’ He did not have to explain what he meant.

‘We have not been apart since Spain. I’ll not desert you now.’ Bart’s thick brows knitted together in one straight line.

Devlin regarded his friend with a wan smile. ‘Sophie will not wish to leave Madeleine, I expect, and I doubt you will wish to leave Sophie. Am I correct?’

Bart did not answer, but neither did his craggy brows move from their stern expression.

‘I can only do this if I know they remain safe.’ Devlin’s voice became low and insistent. ‘I must depend on you to look out for them. I will not be able to see to it myself.’

Bart stared at him as the hack neared St James’s Street. ‘I will do as you say.’

That afternoon, Madeleine was alone in the house. Linette napped. Sophie, who had insisted herself fully recovered, went to return her sewing to Madame Emeraude and get another batch. Bart accompanied her, so she need not carry the basket.

Devlin left to see the Marquess, to announce his decision to seek a wife so as to release his allowance.

Madeleine hated this solitude. Busy all morning, she had given herself no time to think of Devlin searching for a wife. And leaving her.

Now there were no distractions.

The only fantasy she could muster was of Devlin in a church with a beautiful lady like the Marchioness at his side, saying his vows. If she shook off that unwanted reverie, she saw him facing the same lady in his bed.

She grabbed her sewing and settled herself in the parlour's window seat. The day was clear, the kind of day she once might have spent on horseback, galloping over the hills near her home. Those days felt as unreal to her as her fantasies about Devlin. She frowned over her stitches. Sophie had helped her design an apron to protect her dresses during the day. They had found an old bedsheet to make it with. Stitching was laborious, but she was determined to finish the garment when she was not needed helping Sophie with the dresses.

Sewing simply did not occupy enough of her mind, and this morning of all mornings she did not wish to think. Devlin would marry and she would be sent away.

She supposed she should be grateful that he intended to take care of her and Linette. It was a good fortune, a perfect solution to all their problems. Perhaps Devlin would visit after he wed. Lots of men kept mistresses, she knew. Several had offered her a *carte blanche*, but Farley inevitably found out and they never offered again.

She refused to rank Devlin the same as those odious creatures who used to drool over her. He was not like them. Being with him was so different than being with other men. So wonderful. Devlin was a man like no other.

She turned back to her stitches. Perhaps if she became truly skilled at sewing, she and Sophie could earn enough for a little place to stay, enough to feed and clothe themselves and Linette.

Devlin would be free.

Madeleine concentrated on speeding up her sewing, necessary for a seamstress. She tried very hard to keep the stitches the same size and close together. Sometimes she would forget to use the thimble and push on the needle with her bare finger. More often, she poked herself with the needle's point instead of moving her fingers away.

For a few moments, the effort consumed her mind, but a noise in the street distracted her. A shiny barouche with a splendid pair of matched bays pulled up in front of the house. The horses were as fine as any she had ever seen. What stable had bred them? she wondered. They were identical in size, their markings so similar one would suppose they had been twins. She wished she had seen them in motion.

The knocker of the door sounded, and she jumped. She peeked out the glass to see who knocked. An unknown man stood there. The driver of the elegant equipage?

She opened the door.

The man who stood before her was more refined than any she had ever seen. His buckskins and driving coat were so finely tailored they looked moulded to his well-formed frame. His eyes, regarding her with a startled expression, seemed familiar, as did the set of his chin.

'I was given this as Lord Devlin Steele's direction.' He eyed her as men usually did, but without the typical prurient gleam.

'Lord Devlin is not presently at home,' she said.

He stepped past her, across the threshold, though she had not given him leave to do so. Her heart beat in alarm and she was acutely aware of being alone in the house.

She straightened her posture. 'Perhaps you would wish to leave your card.'

He removed his hat. 'I wish to wait.'

She bit her lip. She dare not betray being alone. His eyes still carefully assessed her.

'Who are you?' His question was more like a command.

She bristled. Smiling with bravado through her nervousness, she said, 'Forgive me for not introducing myself. I had thought it proper for visitors to announce themselves first.'

His eyes flashed at her insolence. She supposed he was not one accustomed to having his behaviour questioned. She smiled again and cocked her head as if waiting.

'The Marquess of Heronvale,' he said impatiently.

Her smile vanished. Devlin's brother.

'You are?' he commanded again.

She waved her hand as if his question was foolish, but curtsied politely. 'Miss England at your service, my lord. I am the...the housekeeper.'

'Indeed?' His eyebrows lifted in a top-lofty expression and his eyes flicked up and down her person once more.

She took a breath. 'Lord Devlin intended to visit you this afternoon, my lord. Perhaps you might find him at your residence.'

He made no move to leave. 'I will wait for him.'

She took his hat and showed him into the parlour, where he stood continuing to watch her. She scooped up her sewing from the window seat and twisted the material in her hand, wishing she had finished the garment so it could cover her pale yellow muslin dress.

'I shall bring tea.' It sounded like what a housekeeper might do. He still stood, watching her.

As she moved to leave, his voice stopped her, sounding less imperious. 'Tell me, Miss England. My brother...is he well?'

An odd question. 'Yes, he is. Very well, my lord.' She curtsied again and hurried out the door.

The Marquess watched the retreating figure, wondering what to make of this surprise in his brother's household. Housekeeper, indeed. The young woman—lord, she looked more like a girl—was a breathtaking beauty with startlingly blue eyes and dark unruly hair. Where had Devlin found her? He had heard no rumours of his brother forming a liaison.

He strolled around the room, intrigued, as well, with the genteel furnishings. The place must have commanded a respectable rent. With this 'housekeeper', it was easy to see why Devlin wished to move. And he could see why his little brother had overspent his due. A woman of Miss England's face and figure would not come cheap, as her tasteful new attire could attest.

He'd not reckoned on his brother living with a mistress, had not conceived the notion even when Serena reported seeing Devlin with a woman. Devlin had introduced Serena to her as if she were respectable. Devlin should have told him about her.

He should not be surprised Devlin had not. Ned wandered over to the window. He would have disapproved. He would have given Devlin a list of cogent reasons why keeping a mistress was irresponsible and he would have reminded Devlin of his duty.

Ned had often thought about keeping a mistress himself. There were times when his masculine urges raged in a manner he could not inflict upon his delicate wife, and a willing woman would have easily slaked his desires.

But he had not.

In any event, Devlin had no business keeping a woman. He had no fortune of his own to command. Ned stood again and peered out the window. He had planned merely to assure himself Devlin was not ill and be on his way. He pulled on the bell cord.

Miss England appeared at the door. 'Yes, my lord?'

At least she played her role of housekeeper well. Puzzling, she spoke like an educated miss. Still, her youth did not make sense. She could be no more than nineteen.

‘Please have someone instruct my tiger to walk the horses.’

‘Yes, my lord,’ she replied.

He watched from the window to see it done and was surprised when Miss England went from the house to speak to his tiger.

A few minutes later, she entered with a tea tray. She poured the tea prettily and offered some lemon cakes, as well. He noticed tea leaves swimming in his cup.

He could not resist baiting her. ‘Tell me, Miss England, how long have you been in my brother’s...employ?’

‘Not long, sir,’ she replied, an edge to her voice.

‘He had not spoken to me of having a housekeeper.’

She did not lower her gaze at this question. She smiled instead. ‘Indeed? Do gentlemen discuss such matters?’

He narrowed his eyes, ‘Was it you whom my wife met with Devlin—Lord Devlin?’

Her cheeks flushed. ‘Yes, my lord. She kindly spoke to me.’

He ought to wring Devlin’s bloody neck. How dare he put Serena in such a position, to speak to one such as this Miss England? He glared at her.

But at the moment she looked more like a timid young girl, nervous and uncertain. It was difficult to maintain his anger.

‘May I be excused, my lord?’ Her cheekiness had fled, at least. He wished to ask more questions, but could think of none.

‘Deddy?’ A small voice sounded from the doorway, and Miss England turned pale.

Ned turned to come face to face with a tiny child, no more than a baby, rubbing her eyes and yawning.

The very image of his brother.

Chapter Ten

Ned stared at the child, a doll-like little girl who clutched a wooden horse in her hand. Even the toy was like one Devlin had carried with him at that age. She had blue eyes instead of green. Even so, this little girl was a female version of Devlin twenty-five years ago. The child stole a wary glance at him and ran to Miss England, who scooped her up in her arms.

‘I want Deddy,’ the child said.

Miss England flushed.

‘Daddy?’ Ned asked, raising an eyebrow.

The young woman blinked rapidly.

‘The child’s word for papa?’ Perhaps the child had picked up the Scottish term from the faithful Bart.

Her eyes darted. ‘No, indeed, for a...a...toy.’ She looked at the girl. ‘Go above stairs now, sweetling. Mama will be up directly.’

The child flung her little arms around Miss England’s neck. ‘No!’

Ned remembered that feeling. Chubby arms clasping his neck, the awesome knowledge that such devotion could be directed at him. His littlest brother, following him everywhere when he was home on school holiday. Worshipping him. Needing him.

‘She is Devlin’s child.’ He did not ask.

A panicked look flashed across Miss England’s face. She recovered quickly, meeting his eye. ‘She is my child.’

Her child? She looked barely old enough.

The little girl studied him with wide lash-fringed eyes. ‘Who zat, Mama?’

‘He is the Marquess,’ she responded.

His title would mean nothing to the child. But it would warm his heart if he again heard a childish voice call him Ned.

The little girl squirmed and her mother set her down.

Ned squatted to the child. ‘And what is your name?’

‘Winette,’ the shy little voice said, a thumb popping into her mouth.

‘Winette?’ He looked to Miss England.

‘Linette,’ she said.

Ned smiled at the child. ‘That is a splendid horse you have, Linette. May I see it?’

Linette thrust the hand holding the horse in Ned’s face.

‘A splendid horse, indeed. Does your horse have a name?’

She released her thumb. ‘Deddy’s horse.’

Ned glanced at Miss England. Her hand had flown to her mouth. With a halting gesture, he touched Linette’s dark curly hair. His brother used to run to him for comfort, he recalled. Ned would mop up his tears and stroke his hair just like this.

‘Markiss play?’ the little girl asked, cocking her head and batting her eyelashes.

Ned laughed and ruffled the child’s hair, a smile lingering on his lips. Yes, he would like to play again, to sit on the floor and gallop a wooden horse.

He stood instead. ‘I shall take my leave, Miss England. Please tell my brother he shall hear from me.’

‘Yes, my lord.’ She hurried to fetch his hat and gloves and to open the door for him. The child hovered behind her, and he gave the little girl a final smile as he walked out of the door, his barouche pulling up in front of the house.

Linette ran out the door, pointing. ‘Horse! Horse, Mama!’

Miss England rushed out to grab her. Ned caught the child first and held her until Miss England took her hand. Regretting he had to leave the child, Ned continued towards the barouche. He stopped, a thought interrupting the plan half-formed in his head.

He turned back. 'Miss England?'

She hesitated. 'Yes, my lord?'

'Are you married to my brother?'

Surprise flashed across her face and she blushed deep red. 'No, my lord.'

He continued on his way, climbing onto the barouche and snapping at the rungs while his tiger leapt on to the back.

From an alleyway across the street, black eyes watched the retreating vehicle and glanced back at the mother and child re-entering the house.

What was meant by that tender scene? Lord Farley wondered. The Marquess of Heronvale going all mawkish over Madeleine's child? Perhaps the man's fancy ran toward young ones. Rumour said he had no fancy for his ice-maiden wife.

Farley tried to calculate what small fortune a marquess might spend for the rare chance to dally with such a child. He rubbed his hands at the thought.

Perhaps he should have sold the child to settle his debts instead of giving up Madeleine. Madeleine had become so much more difficult since the child was born. He should have got rid of it straight away.

Cursed chit—Madeleine had vowed to slit her own throat if he so much as touched the child, and he'd decided to keep her happy. He'd counted upon her being grateful enough to come willingly to him, like the first time when she'd been flushed with delight. That was what he desired again.

Farley leaned against the lamppost. He removed a pinch of snuff from its box and inhaled it. After a spasm of sneezing, he glanced back at the door she'd walked through, recalling the sway of her hips. She was made for seduction. If ever there was a woman created for passion, it was Madeleine.

So why did she withhold that passion from him? It enraged him. He thought he'd taught her a lesson when he forced her to become the bribe in his crooked games. He'd intended to offer her only a few times, but she'd made him a tidy profit. Men would come to his establishment every night, hoping to win time with her, especially if he offered her only every now and then. Then they returned often, losing more blunt each time.

While she was fat with child she'd earned him nothing. If he'd been in London he'd have dealt with her before it had grown too big to get rid of, but one did not refuse an emperor's summons or, to be more accurate, one from an emperor's emissary. Not when the emperor paid well for information gleaned from brandy-loosened tongues and gentlemen desperate to settle gambling debts.

He should have taken her to France with him, but that night before he left she'd angered him, and it had suited him well enough not to set eyes on her for a while. Besides, she'd become something of a patriot. More than once he discovered her poring over newspapers filled with stories about the war. If she had discovered his business dealings with Napoleon, she might have been stupid enough to pass the word to some fool willing to put country above fortune.

Stepping out of the alley onto the pavement, Farley gazed once more at the apartments where Madeleine lived with Devlin Steele. He thought of her naked beneath Steele, and his own loins ached.

He'd have her again, even if he had to kill to get her.

Madeleine paced the floor, wishing Devlin would hurry home and dreading when he would.

What could be worse for Devlin than the Marquess of Heronvale learning of her existence and that of her child? She knew what could be worse—his suspecting the child to be Devlin's.

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