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REGENCY  
ROMANCES

SOCIETY'S  
*Beauties*

REGENCY'S  
MOST SEDUCTIVE SECRETS

SOPHIA JAMES

Sophia James

**Society's Beauties: Mistress at  
Midnight / Scars of Betrayal**

«HarperCollins»

## **James S.**

Society's Beauties: Mistress at Midnight / Scars of Betrayal /  
S. James — «HarperCollins»,

Scandal can unleash the deepest passions... Mistress at Midnight Haunted by rumours following her husband's suspicious death, Aurelia St Harlow has withdrawn from society. Still, Lord Stephen Hawkhurst finds the troubled beauty impossible to resist. Yet Aurelia is suspected of treason and, as England's greatest spy, he must uncover her every secret and as the truth unfolds so does their desire... Scars of Betrayal Cassandra Northrup had believed Nathaniel dead... until now. Once, she had loved him, given herself to him. But then she had betrayed him. Yet passion can be born out of betrayal – and now they are reunited and desire crackles between them once more, will Cassie reveal the secret she's long kept hidden?

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**SOPHIA JAMES** lives in Chelsea Bay, on Auckland, New Zealand's North Shore, with her husband who is an artist. She has a degree in English and History from Auckland University and believes her love of writing was formed by reading Georgette Heyer in the holidays at her grandmother's house.

Sophia enjoys getting feedback at [www.sophiajames.net](http://www.sophiajames.net).

**Society's Beauties**

**Mistress at Midnight**

**Scars of Betrayal**

**Sophia James**

**MILLS & BOON**

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**SOCIETY'S BEAUTIES**

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**Sophia James**

*This one's for you, Nina. I really appreciate your support*

## *Chapter One*

*June 1855—England*

Stephen Hawkhurst, Lord of Atherton, felt the wind rise up from the bottom of Taylor's Gap, salt on its edge. He frowned as he breathed in, a smooth wooden railing all that held him between this world and the next one.

So very easy to end it, to simply let go and fall into oblivion. Pushing harder, he felt the barrier give and a few stones, dislodged by the movement, hurled down the incline to disappear into nothingness.

'If you jump, you would need to land exactly between that rock and the cliff,' a voice said, one small gloved hand pointing downwards. 'If you veer to the left, you will be caught on those bushes, you see, and such a fall could leave you merely crippled. To the right is a better option as the shale would be more forgiving before it threw you over the edge into the sea. However, if you excel at the art of swimming...?' She stopped, the implication understood.

Stiffening, Hawk turned to see a woman standing near, a black veil hiding every feature of her face. Her clothes were heavy and practical. A lady of commerce, perhaps? Or the daughter of a merchant? God, what luck was there in that? Miles from anywhere and The voice of reason close by.

'I may, of course, merely be taking in the view.' The irritation in his words was unbecoming and he was a man who was seldom rude to women. But this one was far from cowed.

'One would generally look to the horizon if that was the case, sir. The sun is setting, you see, and it would be this vista your eyes would be drawn towards.'

'Then perhaps I am tired?'

'Fatigue would show itself in a leaning gait and great exertion would be seen in dust upon your boots.' Her head tipped down to look. Stephen imagined her satisfaction when she saw his shiny new black Hessians. He wished she would turn and leave, but she stood silent and waiting, breath even and unhurried.

Surveying the nearby paths, he realised that she was alone. Unusual for a lady not to be chaperoned. He wondered how she had got here and where she would go to next.

There was a hole in the thumb of her right-hand glove and an unbuffed nail was bitten to the quick. The hat she wore hid her hair completely, though an errant curl of vibrant red had escaped from its clutches and lay across the darkness of her clothes like rubies in a coal seam. Beneath the notes of a heavier perfume he smelt the light freshness of violets.

'I came here often as a young girl with my mother and she would stand just where I am and speak of what was over the seas in all the directions that I might name.' This was said suddenly after a good few moments of silence. He liked how she did not feel the need to fill in every space with chatter. 'France lies that way, and Denmark, there. A thousand miles to the north-east a boat could founder against the rocky coast of the Kingdom of Norway.'

She had a slight accent, though the cadence held the timbre of something that Hawk did not recognise. The thought amused him for he was a master of discerning that which people wished not to divulge. He had made his life from it, after all.

'Where is your mother now?'

'Oh, she left England many years ago. She was French, you understand, and my father had no desire to stop her in her travels.'

His interest was firmly caught as he took a step back. 'He did not accompany her, then?'

'Papa loves poetry and text. His vocation is as small as my mother's was large and a library filled with books was all he ever claimed to want in adventure. Her journeys would have worried him.'

'The adventurer and the academic? An interesting combination. Which parent do you favour?'

The question came from nowhere, for Stephen had certainly not meant to voice it, but the woman

had a charm that was...unexpected. It had been a long time since he had felt the sense of aliveness he did here with her.

One hand crossed to her face, pushing the gauze closer to her cheek. In The slanting light of sunset he could make out a finely chiselled nose. 'Neither,' she answered. 'The will to do exactly as one wants requires a certain amount of spare time which is a commodity I can ill afford.'

'Because you spend the day rearranging your father's extensive library?' He found himself smiling.

'Everyone has a story, sir, though your assumptions lack as much in truth as any tale that I might fashion around you.'

Stepping back another pace, he felt the bush at his back, sturdy and green. 'What would you say of me?'

'I would say that you are a man who leads others, though few really know you.'

Such a truth cut quick, because she was right. He seldom showed anyone who he was.

But she was not finished. Taking his hand, she turned it palm upwards, tracing the lines with her first finger. Stephen felt like snatching it back, away from the things that she might or might not see.

'You have a high falsetto singing voice, seldom touch strong drink and never bet at the New Year races at Newmarket.'

Her voice held a note of humour, and relief bloomed. 'So very exact. You ought to have a stall outside the Leadenhall.'

'It's a gift, sir,' she returned, her head tipping to one side as though measuring all that he was. Like a naturalist might watch an insect before sticking it through with a pin. There was something in her stillness that was unnerving and he tried his hardest to discern the rest of her features.

'Do you have a name?' Suddenly he wanted to know just who she was and where she came from. Coincidences were seldom as they seemed. His job had at least taught him that.

'Aurelia, my lord,' she offered, a new tone in his given title, a tone he understood too well. She gave no surname.

'You know who I am, then?'

'I have heard of you from many different people.'

'And the gossip of strangers is so very truthful.'

'It is my experience that beneath the embellishment, tittle-tattle always holds a measure of truth. It is said that you spend a lot of time away from England and its society?'

'I am easily bored.'

'Oh, I doubt that entirely.'

'And easily disappointed.'

'An explanation that may account for your presence here at Taylor's Gap.'

He breathed out hard, the possibility of blackmail creeping in unbidden.

She faced him directly, now, and lifted her veil. Freckles across the bridge of a fine nose were the first things he registered. Then he saw that one eye was blue and the other dark brown. A mismatched angel!

'It was an accident. A bleed. I fell from a horse as a child and hit my head hard.' This explanation was given in the tone of one who might have often said it.

She was so pale the blood in her veins could be seen through the skin at her temple. Like the wings of a butterfly, barely there. He wanted to lean forwards and touch such delicacy, but he did not because something in her eyes stopped him. He knew this familiar look of supplication, his many estates holding the promise of a largesse that was tantalising.

But not from her. The disappointment of it pierced hard even as she began to speak.

'I would ask a favour of you, Lord Hawkhurst.'

There. It was said, and in the circumstances he would have to be generous. It wasn't everyone who had seen the demons in him so clearly.

‘Indeed.’

‘I have a sister, Leonora Beauchamp, who is both young and beautiful and I want her to marry a man who would care for her well.’

As her words settled, fury solidified. ‘I am not in the market for a wife, madam, no matter what you might like to say of this encounter.’

Her voice shook as she continued to speak. ‘It isn’t marriage I petition. I merely want you to invite Leonora to the ball I know you to be giving next week at your town house. I shall accompany her to ensure you know who it is to make some fuss of. A dance should do it, or two, if you will. After that I promise to never darken your pathway again.’

The anger in him abated slightly. ‘To where should I send the invitations?’

‘Braeburn House in Upper Brook Street. Any delivery boy would know of it.’

‘How old is your sister?’

‘Eighteen.’

‘And you?’

She did not answer and his heart felt heavy as he looked down at her. ‘So you are Aurelia Beauchamp?’

The shake of her head surprised him. ‘Nay, that is Leonora’s surname, but if you could see it in yourself to welcome my sister despite any...misgivings, I would be most appreciative.’ Removing one glove, she delved into her pocket and brought out a pendant fashioned with a single diamond in white gold. ‘I do not ask you to do this for nothing, Lord Hawkhurst, but if you say yes to the bargain between us I do expect you to hold up your end of it, without excuse. Could you promise me that?’

Interest began to creep under wrath, the flush on her face as becoming as any he had ever seen on a woman. She was a beauty! Beneath the fabric of her other hand he saw a ring, bold against the sheen of superfine.

Was she married? If she was his woman, he would have not let her roam the countryside so unprotected.

He smiled at such thoughts. Unprotected? Lord, was he finally growing a conscience? Thirty-one years old and all of them hard edged. The ends of his fingers curled against his thighs and he made himself breathe in, the souls of those he had sent to the afterlife calling close.

For Queen and for country or for the dubious needs of men left in charge of a foreign policy decades out of tune. Aye, England had not thanked him at all and he did not wish it to. But sometimes in a quiet corner of the world such as this one, and in the company of a woman who was as beautiful as she was beguiling, he wished for...something else.

He could not name it. It was too removed from the roads that he had followed, at first in wanderlust and excitement and now out of habit and ennui.

Murder, even in the circumstances of national security, sounded wrong. His father would have told him that, and his mother, too, had she lived. But they were long gone and the only family member left to give some guidance was Alfred; his uncle’s scrambled mind still lurked in the remnants of the second Peninsular Campaign under Wellington, reality lost in the scarred remains of his left temple.

Stephen would have sworn had he been alone, but the sunset crept over her upturned face, painting untarnished skin the blush pink of dusk. The very sight of her took his breath away. Like an angel offering redemption to a sinner, her fragile stillness warming a heart long since encased in ice.

‘Keep the pendant, madam, for I should wish another payment altogether, here in the open air and far from any community.’ The beat of his rising want hummed beneath the banter. Part of him knew he should not voice a request that was as inappropriate as it was banal, but the larger part of him ignored such a warning. He was a man who had lived for years in the land of shadows and ill repute and it had rubbed off on him, he supposed. Aye, he almost welcomed the distance scandal had brought, though sometimes, like now, a crack appeared, small and fragile, and a worm of longing for

the good life that he might have lived wriggled through. He should turn and walk away, protecting the little decency still left inside him.

But he didn't.

Instead he said that which had been building from the first moment of meeting her. 'All I want as payment is a kiss, given freely and without anger.'

She waved such a notion away, the diamond clutched awkwardly in her hand. 'You do not understand, my lord, it is my sister whom I need you to introduce into polite society. It is not a liaison for myself that I seek here...'

'Then I refuse your terms.'

She was silent and still, long slender fingers worrying the dark folds of her skirt, and further away the birds gathered for a last chorus before slumber.

'Only a kiss, you say?' Whispered. Unbelieving.

The deep blush of blood bloomed under paleness.

He would know her name soon enough and then he would despise her as everybody else did, and too late to change it. But a chance for Leonora to be in the top echelons of London's Society was not to be dallied with.

One chance.

Fate had a way of occasionally throwing a lifeline and who was she to refuse? Even had he asked for more she could not have said no. For Leonora and for the twins. The stakes had risen as their circumstances had declined and with Papa... She shook her head. She would not think of him.

Goodness, why did he not just take the pendant and be done with it? It was worth so much more than this nonsense he sought. And how was this to work? Did she face him and wait or did he require some prior flirtation?

A refusal would egg a man like him on. She knew it. Better to be sensible and allow him this one small favour, hold her lips up to his and close her eyes, tightly, until it was over.

His finger against her throat stopped every logical train of thought, the gentle play of the sensual so very unexpected. If she had been stronger, she might have stepped back and away. But the sensation of a man whose very name incited hysteria and frenzy amongst a great portion of the fairer sex in England caressing her was mesmerising and she could neither move nor call a stop to it.

The braiding holding the material of her gown together was thick and stiff, a resilient barrier to any more intimate caress. She was glad of such armour.

The hat surprised her, though, his free hand simply lifting the contraption off her head and away, the trailing ties lost in a growing wind as the piece fell to her feet.

'The colour of fire,' he said of her hair.

Or of shame, she thought, deep amber catching the final burst of sunset. She could see in his expression just what she had so often seen in those of others.

Uncertainty.

All the difficulties in her life surfaced, roaming free in her head, and she shut her eyes.

'Nay. I want you to see me.' He waited until she complied.

Closer he came, breath against her skin, the dark green of his pupils surrounded by gold. She could have fallen into those eyes, like the sky into a puddle, fathomlessly deep. Disorientated, she felt him draw her inwards, the muscles in his arms strong. She would remember this particular moment all the days of her life, she thought, with a heat of anticipation beating inside. His right temple held a raised crescent scar beneath the line of hair.

Blood surged through fear, like a river breaking its banks and running unconfined across a land it did not normally traverse, taking with it all that was more usually there. A changing landscape. An altered truth.

His heat was surprising. Each part of her skin seemed on fire as his lips took her own, ignoring the small token she thought to give him and opening her mouth to his tongue instead.

Inside, tasting, hard pressure and thin pain winding upwards from the depths of her being. Her fingers came to his neck of their own accord, threading through dark strands, her body splayed along the length of his, no space to separate them. She felt him turn her into a deeper embrace, the ache of need blooming over any sense that she might have tried to keep hold of, and she opened to him further. Her whole body now, legs jammed against the junction of his thighs, riding lust. His breathing was as hoarse as hers, no control, the huge yawning space of nature about them consigned to only this touch.

Hers. She wanted more. She wanted what she read of and dreamed about in her bed late at night as all the house slumbered and the banked fires dimmed.

She felt his masculinity through the wool of her skirt as he tipped his head to break the kiss.

‘God.’ The sound he uttered was neither soft nor gladdened. It was harsh and angry and uncertain, his mouth nuzzling her throat, biting into flesh, asking for completion, the knowledge of all he sought unspoken. When his thumb ran across the hardness of her nipple, flicking at the covering of bombazine, she simply went to pieces, the control that she had kept so tightly bound dissolving into disorder.

He held her against the half-light and the silence and the empty landscape, and release left her shaking. No sense in it, save feeling. When he raised her chin she took in the glory as he watched her, waves of passion wrenching gasps without voice. Lost and found, the gold in his eyes the only touchstone to a different reality, the tightened cords of lust entwined into every sinew of her body, her nails running unnoticed down the skin at his neck. A thousand hours or a single moment? She could not know the extent of her loss of governance until the world reformed and they were standing again on the top of Taylor’s Gap.

Aurelia felt embarrassment and then shame. If he let her go, she would fall, like a boneless thing, all stamina gone. Laying her head against his chest, she listened to his heartbeat, the strong and even rhythm bringing her back.

‘Thank you.’ She could not say more and to say less would have been mean spirited. He had to know that, at least, but in the face of her appalling behaviour all she wanted was to be gone.

Lord. She had come as he watched her, the feel of her body tight against his own and wonder in her eyes. Like quicksilver. Like magic. Like all his dreams wrapped into one, her long red hair curling against his skin, the serpent snakes of Medusa.

He knew not one single thing about her save that of a connection in flesh.

But he wanted her. He wanted to lay her down beneath the bushes behind them and remove the black and dowdy robe. He wanted to see her slender pale limbs in the oncoming moonlight as his hands wandered the lines of them before slipping into the wet warmth of her centre. He wanted to take her and know her again and again until there was nothing left of self, melded into the eternal.

His cock grew at such awareness and he could not stop the swelling.

She felt it, too. He saw the flicker of the awareness of danger in her eyes as her tongue took the dryness from her lips. He heard her breath quicken, the line of darker blue around one pale eye pulsating.

His woman. To take. The smell of her filled his nostrils, dangerous yet tempting, all the rules of gentlemanly conduct crossing over into darkness.

‘Go.’ It was all he could say for he did not trust himself enough to deny such want. ‘I shall send you the invitations.’

The anger beneath his words must have registered because she moved back, shadow falling across her face, her hair lifting in the breeze as she turned, footsteps and then silence, only whorls of dust left in her wake.

Kneeling at the bottom of the railing, Stephen hung on to the solid wood, wild despondency all that was left. Lord, it was getting worse, this dispiritedness, claiming the early evening hours as well as the midnight ones. The demons of his past were gathering, armies of lost souls and foundered causes hammering at all he had stood for in the pursuit of justice. Could it have been for nothing?

Crumpling the black hat she had left behind in his fist, he looked for the brandy flask in his jacket pocket and undid the silver chain. Drinking deeply, he knew without a doubt that the solace of strong liquor was the only thing still keeping him sane.

The carriage she had rented was waiting in the place she had left it and she scrambled in, ordering the driver on even before she settled.

Away. Gone. It was all she wanted.

She should not have come to this place at all, but the memory of her mother here was strong and today, travelling between the mills and London, she had wanted to stop and remember.

Sylvienne had brought her here often because she said it reminded her of a place in Provence and for just a little while Mama did not stand in England, but in France, the mistral on her face and the little Alpilles at her back.

Aurelia would wait there with her, fingers laced together as her mother listened to the silence, her particular melancholy still remembered so vividly. Afterwards they would retire to one of the nearby villages for a drink and a meal and Mama would talk of her childhood, the heated sun and the trees that shaded roads bound by fields full of flowers.

And now here was another memory. Aurelia had recognised Lord Hawkhurst the moment she had seen him there, in the wind above the cliffs, his black cloak billowing and drawing her on despite misgivings. Had she gained a favour or lost one, she wondered, with her ridiculous reaction to his kiss? Shame had her breathing out hard and chastising herself for her inappropriate exchange with Lord Stephen Hawkhurst.

She should have insisted on the pendant as payment, but for a moment she had desired another truth, wanting to know something of unexpected passion and the melding together of souls.

She smiled wryly. Well, she had found that out. Bringing her hand to her lips, she touched her fingers to the place where they had been joined, trying to feel again the euphoria and delight.

Unexpected and addictive.

The sort of reaction her mother had made an art form of with her years of numerous lovers, reaching for that elusive and fleeting moment of forgetfulness.

A frown formed on Aurelia's brow.

She could not be the same, could not encourage feelings long since bottled to spring into a sort of half life, contained between scandal and ecstasy.

*Which parent do you favour?*

Five moments ago she would have answered 'Papa' without question, but now...?

No. the genie must be stopped before more emotions wanted to escape. She had learnt already the high price of her own ill-considered choices and now there were others needing her, depending on her...

Taking a deep breath she smoothed down her skirts and pulled her gloves on. She was an expert in the appearance of control; the smile of casual indifference she had perfected returned and the racing beat in her heart returned to quiet.

Lord Stephen Hawkhurst was to be avoided at all costs. His cousin had at least taught her that.

## *Chapter Two*

*London*

'She's a lovely girl from a good family, Hawk. Safe. Pretty. Well thought of.'

There was something in the way Lucas Clairmont listed the attributes of Lady Elizabeth Berkeley that made him feel uneasy.

'You said you needed to settle down, for God's sake, and that you wanted to be a thousand miles away from the intrigues of Europe. As the only daughter of a respectable and aristocratic family, she certainly fits that bill.'

Finishing the drink he was holding, Stephen poured himself another before phrasing a question that had been worrying him.

'When you met Lillian, Luc, how did she make you feel?'

'My wife knocked me sideways. She took the ground from underneath my feet in the first glance and I hated her for it, whilst wanting her as I had never wanted another woman in my life.'

'I see.' The heart fell out of his argument. 'Elizabeth is more like a gentle wind or a quiet presence. When I kissed her once upon the hand she felt like a glass doll, ready to shatter into pieces should I take it further.'

Silence greeted this confession. Damn, Stephen thought, he should have said nothing, should have kept his mouth shut so that uncertainty did not escape to make him question an amiable and advantageous union. He was no longer young and Elizabeth Berkeley was the closest to coming near to what he thought he needed in a woman.

'There are different kinds of attractions, I suppose,' Luc finally replied. 'You seemed happy enough with the arrangements last week. What's changed that?'

'Nothing.' The room closed in on Hawk as he thought of his encounter at Taylor's Gap, fiery silk running through his fingers like living flame.

Elizabeth did not question him. She accepted all that he had been with a gentle grace. She saw only the goodness in people, their conviviality and well-mannered ways—a paragon of docility and charm.

Unease made him dizzy, the black holes of his life filling with empty nothingness. What might a woman such as that see inside him when the shutters fell away? Nay, he would never allow them to.

'I have it on good authority that her family expect you to offer for her. If you have any doubts...?'

'I do not.'

Damn it, he liked Elizabeth. He liked her composure and her contentment. He liked her dimples, her sunny nature and her pale blue eyes that were always smiling. He needed peace and serenity and she would give him this, a sop against the chaos that had begun to consume him. He filled up his third glass.

'You drink more than you ever have done, Hawk. Nat is as worried about you as I am.'

Smiling, the stretch of pretence felt tight around the edges of his mouth. Lucas Clairmont and Nathaniel Lindsay had been his best friends since childhood and each had had their demons.

'I remember saying the same to you not so long ago.'

'If you want to talk about it...'

'There is nothing to say. I am about to be betrothed to a woman who is as beautiful as she is good natured. I like her family and I like her disposition. She will give me heirs and I in turn will give her the security of the Atherton wealth and title.'

'Then it sounds like a sterling arrangement for you both. A marriage of much convenience.' The hollow ring of censure worried him.

'I am tired, Luc, tired of all that I have been. "A sterling arrangement", as you put it, might not be such a bad thing. Hemmed in by domesticity, I shall be happy.'

He picked at the superfine of his breeches as he spoke and crossed his legs. His boots reflected the chandelier, its many tiers of light spilling down into the room, everything bright upon the surface.

‘Alexander Shavvon said you are doing more than reading codes for the Home Office?’

‘Shavvon could never keep his mouth shut.’

‘Ten years is too long to endure in service. Nat did five and nearly lost his soul. He swears that death stains everyone in the end whether they think it does or not.’ The condemnation in his friend’s words wasn’t gentle, though Hawk knew the warning was given with the very best of intentions.

*I kill people*, Stephen thought as he opened his hand to the light. It shook now, all of the time, the tremors of memory translated into The flesh. *I take policy and make it personal again and again in the dark corruption of power. The black of night, the flame edge of gunpowder and the red crawl of blood. Those are my colours now.*

He wanted to tell Luc this, as a purge or as an atonement, but the words buried in secrecy would not form; the consequence of a life depending on camouflage, he supposed, and ceased to try to find an explanation.

Shadows, veils and mirrors. He could barely recognise the man he had become. Certainly, he did not defend the Realm with the cloak of justice firmly fixed across his shoulders any more; a score of innocent lives had seen to that particular loss as well as a hundred others who had no notion of such a word.

Aye, he needed the fresh, uncomplicated innocence of Elizabeth Berkeley like a man lost in the desert needed water.

‘I am fine, Luc. I have a party about to begin in less than an hour and the promise of the company of a group of people around me whom I enjoy.’

‘A happy man, then?’

‘Indeed.’

Lucas nodded and leant forwards, his glass balanced on his knee. ‘Lilly wants you at Fairley for Hope’s twelfth birthday celebration. She says for me to tell you that were she not quite so pregnant she would be down herself to oversee your choice of a wife.’

Luc’s words relaxed the tension markedly as both laughed, and when the clock at the end of the room boomed out the hour of eight they stood.

‘Let the night begin,’ Lucas said as Stephen finished what was left of his brandy and his man knocked on the door to tell them the first of the evening’s guests would be arriving imminently.

Elizabeth Berkeley and her parents came in the second wave of company. Lady Berkeley looked like an older version of her offspring and for a moment Stephen could see just exactly how her daughter would age: the small lines around her mouth, the droop of skin above her eyes, the social ease with which she sailed into any occasion.

His glance went to Elizabeth dressed in lemon silk and lace. ‘It is so lovely to be here, my lord,’ she said in a lilting whisper, placing one hand on his arm. Her nails were long and polished to a sheen.

A sudden flash of other fingers with nails bitten almost to the quick worried him, for he still wore their trails down his neck, hidden carefully under the folds of collar and tie.

Shaking away memory, he settled back into the moment as the Berkeleys moved on in the line of greeting and the next visitors came forth to be welcomed.

She was suddenly there beside him, the very last of the evening’s guests, her hair wound up in an unflattering fashion, the black bombazine gown she wore unembellished and prim.

‘Mrs Aurelia St Harlow and her sister Miss Leonora Beauchamp.’

A wave of hush covered the room at the name, all eyes turning to the staircase. Aurelia was Charles St Harlow’s widow? God, but she was brave.

*‘How on earth could she even think to come out in society, still?’*

*‘It was she who killed him, of course.’*

*‘Has the strumpet no shame at all?’*

Threads of conversation reached Hawk even as she gave him her hand.

'I thank you for the kind invitation, my lord,' she said, her glance nowhere near meeting his own, 'and would like to introduce to you my sister Miss Leonora Beauchamp.'

The chit was charming, young and well mannered, but Hawk smiled only cursorily before turning back to the other.

'St Harlow was my cousin.'

For the first time, she looked at him directly, her eyes red rimmed from lack of sleep or from poorly placed cosmetics, he could not tell. She wore glasses that were so thick they distorted the shape of her face.

'We are almost family, then.' The smile accompanying the statement was hard.

He thought the sister might have turned away, but Aurelia held her there before him, her force of will biting through the atmosphere in the room, a small island of challenge and defiance.

Finally she leaned forwards and whispered, 'I gave you the exacted payment for the promise of this evening, my lord, and Leonora is not at fault here. Two dances and we will leave.'

'I am not sure, Lia. Perhaps we should go now.' The beginning of tears shone in the younger girl's frightened eyes.

'Do not cry, Leonora. It is me whom they despise. They will love you if you only let them.' Turning back, Stephen saw that Aurelia's hand shook before she buried it into the matt blackness of the wool in her skirt, but she did not give an inch. He had to admire such a resolute feistiness.

'If one beards the lion in his den, one must be brave.' Hawk related this to Miss Leonora Beauchamp and was glad when she smiled because the relief in Aurelia St Harlow's eyes was fathomless, hollow pools of mismatched colour focused upon him.

Years of deception flooded in. An unashamed façade undermined the certainty of others. If Aurelia St Harlow could brazen it out for an hour or more here, he doubted the rumours swirling around her would be quite as damning.

Lord. The promise of a dance with the sister had placed him in a position of difficulty, too. Charles had been one of the last living Hawkhursts, and the closest in blood to him save his uncle, but he had barely known him.

He saw Elizabeth with her family watching, her lips pinched in that particular way she had of showing worry. Guileless. He saw Luc observing him, too, the frown of anger on his brow as pronounced as those of many others. But even this could not make him withdraw his promise and order them gone.

His uncle next to him solved the whole thing entirely as he reached out and took the hand of the one woman in the world he should not have.

'I remember you, Mrs St Harlow. You are Charles's wife.' The use of the present tense made those within hearing press forwards. It was Hawk's experience that no one loved a scandal played out publicly more than the *ton*. 'I liked you right from the start, you see, but you got sadder. She needs to smile more, Stephen. Ask her to dance with you.'

Tragedy, farce and comedy now. The orchestra positioned only a few yards away from them looked at Hawk with expectation on hearing his uncle's loud command and the faces of those below were a mixture of indignation and shock.

He could do nothing less than consign Miss Leonora Beauchamp into the capable and kind hands of Cassandra Lindsay and offer Aurelia St Harlow the chance of a waltz.

*The dance of love*, he thought as he led her to the floor, and wondered why such a notion did not seem as ridiculous as he knew it should have. He hoped his right leg would stand up to the exercise, for of late the old wound had been playing up again.

When he placed his hands about her he felt her stiffen. 'It is my sister whom I would prefer to be where I stand, my lord, for if you adhere to the promised two dances I have just wasted half of them.'

He could not help but smile at such a comment. In response he tightened his grip and felt the full front of her generous bosom. When he looked down he saw she squinted behind thick spectacles.

'Glasses are supposed to cure poor eyesight, Mrs St Harlow, not cause it,' he said softly.

'Things to hide behind have their uses, however, my lord.' He noticed her straining away and gave her the distance because just the feel of her in his arms had begun to make his blood beat thicker. Across the room Elizabeth Berkeley and her parents followed them intently. 'You see, at a soirée such as this one it is preferable to be virtually invisible to those who might wish me ill.'

'They wish you ill because your husband's death was not one that made any sense. The fact that you were the only person there when it happened made you... culpable.'

'A court of law proved I had no hand in anything untoward, my lord. It is not my problem that the *ton* at large refuses to believe these documented facts.'

'Charles was an expert horseman.'

'Who fell at a hedge.'

'One does not generally end up with a sharpened stake embedded through the heart after such an encounter.'

'I am not here to argue my husband's unfortunate and early demise with you, my lord.'

The lack of any true feeling made Hawk pause, though his anger was softened a little when he felt the rapidity of her heartbeat beneath his fingers. She was good at hiding things, he thought. A spy's trait, that.

'Then why exactly are you here?'

'I have three younger sisters with little chance of an advantageous alliance unless they are out and about in society. As you can guess from my reception here tonight, we seldom receive any invitations. I am trying to remedy such a difficulty.'

'So you stalk the peerage in the hope of finding them in compromising positions and then inveigle a card requesting your company at their next social gathering?'

She laughed unexpectedly, the sound running through his bones into the empty darkness of his heart, and the room around them fell away into the windy barrenness of Taylor's Gap.

Was she a sorceress with her bright red hair and her different eyes? Had she bewitched his cousin in the very same manner? He wished the music might end, allowing him the ease of escape, but the orchestra was in full flight with no chance of a quick finale and to order it otherwise would only incite comment.

Aurelia St Harlow continued as if he had not insulted her at all. 'I had no knowledge of you being at Taylor's Gap, Lord Hawk. It was on a whim that I walked in your direction to admire the view and by a trick of coincidence found you there.'

'Fortuitous, then?'

'You speak of our kiss?'

He could barely believe that she would mention such a thing here in the crowded room of the *ton* at play and looked to see that none close had heard her question.

'There are ears everywhere in a gathering such as this one, Mrs St Harlow, and it is prudent to protect a reputation.'

She shook her head and looked away. 'Oh, mine is lost completely already, my lord. I doubt anything else I do could lower it further.'

Again he smiled, the freedom inherent in such a thought enlivening. 'How old are you?' Said before he could think, said from the very depths of interest.

'Twenty-six. An old maid. A woman on the shelf of life and happy for it.' Her eyes strayed to a set of females of a similar age sitting against one wall. 'I used to pity them until I realised how very liberated they actually were.'

His fingers tightened about hers, gloved tonight in a strange hue of grey. He wished he might have felt her skin beneath, the warmth of it and the smoothness.

'My uncle seems more than taken with you and that is saying something. He seldom has time for anyone in society.'

For the first time that evening, genuine warmth entered her eyes. 'I always liked him, too. He showed me around the gardens at the Atherton country seat once and I helped him collect the eggs from the henhouses.'

'Most people ridicule him.'

'Most people loathe me so perhaps the thread in common allows us communion.'

'I do not loathe you, Aurelia.'

She tripped as he said it and fell up against him, the red in her face climbing into beetroot, though the dance music chose that particular point to end and he shepherded her back to her sister.

## *Chapter Three*

Aurelia's cheeks burnt molten and the anger in her rose. Hell and damnation, but she was doing exactly what she had promised herself she would not do. She was feeling again and the ache about her heart made her sick and disorientated.

Not here, she chastised herself, not here amongst the wolves and jackals of a group who would like to do nothing more than tear her to pieces. A plain and untitled girl did not get away with treating one of their own the way she had treated her husband, after all.

Biting down, she swallowed, the thick glass in her spectacles blurring the edges of the room and making her queasy. Leonora at least looked happy and the young man beside her was both personable and well presented. Perhaps this evening would not be such a total loss after all.

Lord Hawkhurst stood next to a beautiful woman, her face wreathed in kindness.

'Lady Cassandra Lindsay, may I introduce Mrs Aurelia St Harlow.'

Lady Cassandra did not falter as she put out her hand in welcome, the grasp of her fingers warm and lingering. Such unexpected amiability was surprising, for it was far more common to encounter only censure.

'It has been a long while since I remember Stephen conversing so fervently with a dance partner.'

'The music did not allow him the courtesy of bidding me farewell, I am afraid, my lady,' she returned. 'I am certain he was much relieved when he was able to escape, though he has promised my sister a dance.' She got this in because Lord Hawkhurst looked anything but happy on the other side of the small circle of people.

'Oh, I rather think her card is full already, Mrs St Harlow. My brother Rodney has pencilled in at least two waltzes.'

Leonora fussed prettily as Lady Lindsay introduced her brother to Aurelia and a small bloom of hope lingered in the air.

Could it even possibly be this easy? When Aurelia looked across at Lord Hawkhurst she saw the gold shards in his eyes harden. He was the tallest man in the room and easily the most prepossessing. No wonder women fell over their feet to be near him. But there was something under the visage that he presented to this society that was...darker.

Glancing away, she made much of extracting a lace handkerchief from her reticule. Charles had had the same sort of darkness, and look where that had got her.

Her sister, on the other hand, had a broad smile on her face and was using her fan most agilely. Aurelia had never seen her so animated and hoped that this was not a bad thing. Did men like a woman to talk quite as much? Was it not too forward to tap a man on the arm in the way that she was doing? Lady Lindsay's brother did not look in the slightest bit offended so perhaps such behaviour was expected. The headache that had been forming all day raked at the sides of her temple because she doubted that they would ever be given such a chance as excellent as this one again. The thought of coming away without contacts was dispiriting.

'Mr Northrup enjoys riding, Lia. I said he should accompany us for a canter around the Park.' Her sister's eyes were wide with hope, the blue in them matching her gown.

'Perhaps he should be careful, then, not to jump hedges,' Hawkhurst drawled in reply, though Cassandra Lindsay merely swatted his arm with her fan.

'Take no notice of Hawk, Mrs St Harlow. Charles was always taking great chances to show off his jumping skills. I couldn't believe he had not broken his neck before he...'. She petered off, her brow furrowing, and the man beside her, whom Lia did not as yet know, began to speak.

'Before he died in the same way that the legends abounding in Transylvania tell of?'

Vampires? He spoke of such? The conversation amongst this group of people seemed irreverent and quick witted. No taboos. No carefully untouched subjects, and after Charles's rigid lack of humour

such wit was refreshing. They laughed a lot, too, she thought, though Lord Hawkhurst's smile came nowhere near his eyes.

'You must not mind Hawk and my husband Nathaniel at all, Mrs St Harlow. I know how very difficult Charles's death must have been for you and I am certain that Rodney would love the chance of being invited into the charming company of your sister for an afternoon's ride. Where do you reside here in London?'

'Braeburn House, Lady Lindsay, in Mayfair.' Leonora was quick with her directions and Aurelia could only applaud her sister's acumen at seizing the moment, but the thought of Hawkhurst paying a social call was worrying.

What would he see there that she had tried to hide? Would they expect to meet Papa? Was there a chance he might talk with those about the area and understand things that she had been so successful thus far in concealing from others?

She was so exhausted with trying to tie all the threads of her life together she could barely breathe. How quickly could it all unravel?

The arrival of a young blonde woman and an older one within the group changed the tone of what was spoken of as introductions were given.

'You look as beautiful as ever, Lady Berkeley,' Cassandra's husband said as he kissed the back of the woman's hand.

'You were always the flatterer, Lord Lindsay. Your mother was the same, God bless her soul.'

The chatter was convivial and familiar between the people who had grown up all of their lives inside the sheltered world of the *ton*. Were Stephen Hawkhurst and Elizabeth Berkeley a couple promised to each other? The thought made Aurelia's head throb harder and she knew that she did not fit in here. She watched as the younger Berkeley woman shyly laid her gloved fingers on Lord Hawkhurst's arm and asked him a question beneath her breath.

His reply was as softly given back, the girl's cheeks glowing as excitement filled her eyes. Elizabeth Berkeley was like the first flush of some exquisite English rose: all promise, sweetness and hope. Aurelia could not remember a time when she had ever been like that.

At five she had watched her mother pack her bags and disappear. At six she had been the unwanted stepdaughter of her father's new wife and at seventeen Charles St Harlow had entered her life, like a falling star burning brightly.

Another waltz was struck and Lord Hawkhurst and Elizabeth Berkeley excused themselves to take to the floor, his arm around the young woman's waist in a careful ownership, the height and colouring of each exactly complementing the other.

'Did you know Hawk well when you were married to his cousin, Mrs St Harlow?' The question was from Cassandra Lindsay, eyes full of curiosity as she moved to stand directly beside Aurelia.

'No, I never once met him. His uncle, however, was a friend.'

A smile lit up Lady Lindsay's entire face. 'Alfred is rather picky about who he accords friendship to. Take Elizabeth Berkeley, for instance. I doubt he realises she exists.'

'She is very beautiful.'

'And quite lovely with it, which is a relief beyond measure if Stephen should decide to offer for her.'

'Which he will?' Aurelia had not meant to ask the question, and from the sharp interest in green eyes knew she had made a mistake by doing so. She was glad of the barrier of thick glass.

'Lord Hawkhurst has never taken a wife and his estate is more than healthy, so it behoves him to provide heirs. How long were you married to Charles?'

'Three years, my lady.' The tone of her voice was flatter than it should have been but tonight, with Leonora's face alight with possibility and hope, Aurelia was finding it hard to feign her usual pretence.

Cassandra Lindsay's next words were therefore unexpected. 'We are having a house party at our country estate in Kent in early September. Would you and your sister like to join us for the weekend?'

Her heart began to beat a little faster, the rhythm of it imbued with an unfamiliar kind of joy. It had been so long since a stranger had reached out a hand in friendship. Still, she could not quite accept the gift without honesty.

'Perhaps Leonora could attend with a chaperon, Lady Lindsay. My presence may be detrimental to the success of your gathering, you see, for there are many stories about me—'

Cassandra Lindsay broke in. 'There are always rumours, Mrs St Harlow, and there are always detractors, but anyone whom Uncle Alfred takes a shine to I would trust with my life.'

'Thank you.' The ache in her throat was surprising as she glanced around, the heavy frowns of others less intimidating after such a conversation.

As the music ended the party regrouped. Elizabeth Berkeley had joined her mother to one side of the room, chatting with a group of other young women all dressed in differing shades of yellow. Stephen Hawkhurst unexpectedly walked back to Aurelia's side.

'Are you promised for this set, Mrs St Harlow?'

His question came quietly and in response Aurelia showed him her dance card without a scribble upon it. 'I seldom garner partners, my lord,' she returned, 'and certainly never the same man twice.'

His mouth turned up as he observed the empty page, and with the gracious strains of Strauss from the orchestra at the head of the room Aurelia felt disorientated.

Something else lingered there, too, but she did not care to examine those feelings as his fingers lifted the battered spectacles from her nose and held them away for a moment.

'Is that better?'

The faces of those around them came into full focus. 'Disfavour is often easier to stomach when it is barely seen, my lord.'

'Many here have their own skeletons should one bother to dig deeper, Mrs St Harlow. Take heart, for you are not the only person in the room with a past.'

Aurelia glanced away as he replaced her looking glasses. Did he speak about himself?

His hair was draped long across the nape of a snowy, crisp white collar, strands of midnight reflecting blue, the sense of danger and menace that she associated with him heightened here.

Charles had been a man who had promised everything and delivered nothing, a liar and a cheat who used those in positions of less power ruthlessly. Stephen Hawkhurst appeared to be the very opposite. She could not imagine him striking fraudulent bargains or making empty promises.

As his uncle joined them, the old man's hand reached down to extract a large handkerchief to wipe his shining brow. Alfred Hawkhurst's eyes were more opaque than she remembered them to be and he had a wheeze that was concerning.

'They don't want me there, Stephen. They never do. I can feel it when I speak to people.' His thin voice shook—a man who had had enough of the lofty world surrounding him.

'I feel exactly the same, Lord Alfred,' Aurelia began as his nephew failed to speak, 'though I find that the wine is helping.' She took two glasses from a passing waiter and handed one to him. Alfred smiled and downed the lot before leaning forwards in a conspiratorial way.

'You were always a favourite, my dear, and I am glad that you do not seem so melancholy now. I used to worry for you when Charles was about.'

Embarrassment swept through Aurelia's whole body. A thousand lies and yet an old man, reportedly mad, had seen through the lot of them. Like her father had. Catching the golden glance of Lord Hawkhurst, she looked away.

She had changed. She had grown up. No one could ever make her so sad again. The silk of Leonora's dress swirled cornflower blue in the middle of the floor, the weave of silver within it catching the light.

Macclesfield silk. Her lifeblood.

'I am more than content, Lord Alfred.' And quite competent, too, she thought. Dancing, needlework, luncheons and music—the pursuits of a well-brought-up young lady had long ceased to be a part of her domain. She tried hard to smile. She fitted nowhere now, like Alfred, lost in the middle somehow, an eternal outsider, looking in but never belonging. Not even knowing how to.

Her fingers strayed to the pendant at her throat, clutching The single diamond until she saw Lord Hawkhurst's eye upon the piece. Why had she worn it? The kiss at Taylor's Gap hung in the air between them in the particular manner of something unfinished. She could see the shape of it in his eyes and in the way he stood, his shoulders rigid with the tension of memory.

'I have always loved jewellery.' Alfred's proclamation was welcomed for it broke the unease, his outstretched hand touching the piece. 'What would you wish to be paid for this, my dear? Is it for sale?'

Hawkhurst carefully moved him back. 'Mrs St Harlow holds the bauble in much esteem and would part with it only under the most extreme of circumstances, Alfred.'

'She told you of that?'

'Indeed she did.' Shadows moved across his face, the planes at his cheeks softer now, and her body recalled the feel of Lord Hawkhurst's skin beneath her fingers, warm and solid, lips slanting deep with the taste of safety.

Aurelia shook her head. Such dreams were not ones she could contemplate again. Besides, had not Cassandra Lindsay stressed the need of a suitable bride at Atherton?

The black bombazine covering her from neck to foot was synonymous with the sort of life she led. Secretive. Careful. Lonely. In bed well after midnight and up well before the dawn.

When Elizabeth Berkeley came back to the circle Aurelia excused herself and wound her way to the ladies' room, where she sat for a good three-quarters of an hour on a chair in the small salon, completely impervious to the stares of others who were also using the chamber.

Another twenty minutes and she could be gone.

Hawk felt Elizabeth's fingers entwined in the fabric of his sleeve. He wished he might have shaken her off and followed Aurelia St Harlow to wherever it was she had gone at least half an hour ago, but appearances had to be maintained and he was always careful in this respect.

Cassie Lindsay watched him vigilantly, too, as she had done for months now, her eyes upon him filled with question. She had made it known that she had asked Mrs St Harlow and her sister to their country seat of St Auburn's in a few weeks' time and that the invitation had been accepted.

The evening was going exactly as Mrs St Harlow would have wished it to and yet now she had disappeared off into a crowd that detested her and was lost to sight.

Alfred had gone looking for her. Just that fact amazed him as his uncle seldom stayed for more than a few moments at any of these public gatherings and never inveigled himself into the lives of those he met here. And what did he damn well mean by referring to her melancholy?

'I just love the colours of the gowns and the music, don't you, my lord? Everyone says that yellow is quite the shade of things this season.' Under the candelabras, Elizabeth's cheekbones were striking.

'Then you are eminently in fashion,' he returned, her gown the colour of sunbeams shimmering in the light. The black bombazine of Mrs St Harlow came to mind, for his cousin had been years dead already and it was far past time to throw off the shades of mourning. He wondered how her hair might look against emerald green or a deep translucent gold.

No. He needed innocence and a lack of complication, he must remember that, the artless push of purity scattering the oncoming darkness. Why, Aurelia St Harlow probably had as many demons inside her as he did.

'I went today into town with Mama and found a jewellery shop that I had not noticed before.' Stephen smiled, imagining Elizabeth enjoying the wares.

‘Mama said I should have purchased the blue sapphire necklace because it showed off the colour of my eyes, but I preferred the ruby because it caught the light so beautifully. Do you think I have made a wise choice, my lord?’

His glance passed across the bauble nestled at her neck, the intricate patterns of gold fussy in design.

‘It suits you entirely.’

‘There was a bracelet to match, as well.’ the glance she gave him had a certain entreaty in it. Hawk knew he should enquire as to the name of the shop and the exactness of its location given the unsaid promises shimmering between them, but the words just would not come.

He saw Mrs St Harlow threading her way back into the room from the corner of his eye. She looked neither left nor right, though even from this distance he could see women and men turning away from her in a deliberate cut. Her chin rose and if he had not known of her unease in the social setting he might have thought that she did not care a jot for the good opinion of others. He was glad she had the glasses to shelter behind.

‘Do you not think so, my lord?’

The pale beauty of Elizabeth’s puzzled gaze fell upon him.

‘I do.’ He had no idea at all as to what he had just agreed but his attention was caught by a group of men Aurelia was about to walk past on one side of the room.

Lord Frederick Delsarte caught her arm, tightly, and held it. Stephen could see the others folding in about her, blocking off any means of escape. The smile she wore was imbued with solid anger, though even from this distance he could detect a certain panic.

‘Would you excuse me for a moment, Miss Berkeley?’

He did not wait for any reply, but strode across to the colonnade shielding the group from the notice of others and walked straight into the contretemps.

‘There you are, Mrs St Harlow,’ he said, placing Aurelia’s hand across the material of his sleeve as he pulled her into his side. ‘Lady Lindsay is most anxious to find you. Something about meeting an old school friend, I think she said.’

Unfortunately Delsarte had had too much to drink and was in no mood to observe the social niceties. ‘We have not finished here,’ he slurred with difficulty, ‘and your cousin’s widow and I have much to talk about.’

‘I sincerely doubt that, Delsarte.’ Hawk hurst’s free hand slipped to the top of the younger man’s arm and pressed, the yowl of pain heartening.

‘It’s Hawkhurst, for God’s sake, Freddy,’ a taller man next to Delsarte whispered in the tone Stephen had become accustomed to people using around him.

‘I would greatly prefer it if you were not to venture anywhere near Mrs St Harlow again, do you understand?’

Caution finally shone through bloodshot eyes. ‘I didn’t realise you knew her so well, Lord Hawkhurst.’

‘Ahhh, but now you do.’ Hawk let go his hold and stepped back, shepherding Aurelia before him as they moved out from behind the pillars.

Fury raced through him as he saw the paleness of her skin welting already into bruises where the bombazine had ridden above her wrist in the struggle. He also saw she swallowed often as though trying to keep back the tears, but he could not be kind. ‘Why the hell would you go off alone and unprotected when you know the communal feeling in the room is so against you? Surely you understand the dangers inherent in social animosity?’

She took a breath. ‘Hatred is generally less demonstrative,’ she returned, and had the temerity to smile.

Hawkhurst looked as if he wanted to kill her, here in the ballroom twenty yards from the woman it was said he would marry, and the ache in her arm from where Freddy Delsarte had grabbed her was beginning to throb.

If Hawk had not intervened, she wondered what might have happened. Could they have dragged her from the room kicking and screaming and not a soul willing to lift a hand in aid?

Save for him.

She should not have come. It was too dangerous and too uncertain and Charles's more carnal predilections were shown within the leer of the younger man's eyes. She knew Hawk had seen this, too, for his grip upon her had tightened imperceptibly.

'You incite great emotion in those about you, Mrs St Harlow, even in the dress of a dowager.'

'Men see what they wish to see, my lord. It is a fault that is universal.'

'I cannot remember you much in the company of my cousin. It seemed you were never in London at all.'

*Breathe*, Aurelia instructed herself when she realised she had simply stopped doing so, the beat of her heart racing through the thickness of black wool.

'There was always much to do at Medlands. Gardening was one of my particular favourites and Charles enjoyed the colours.' She tried to imbue the sort of gladness that she imagined a lady of leisure might feel for such a hobby, her mind scrambling around for the names of common plants just in case he took the conversation further.

'Then you must have been saddened to see the house sold on his death?'

Worry turned. As Charles's only cousin he did not know? She could scarcely believe that he would not, although the fact that Lord Hawkhurst was rumoured to have barely been in England for many years made it seem more than possible. Perhaps no one save her lawyers knew of the financial collapse that her husband had left her in, a hundred chits from the merchants of Medlands village presented and little money to honour them. She had been so careful to pay them back, after all.

Medlands sheltered another family now and Aurelia had not been sorry to pack up the few belongings that were her own and leave the place for ever.

'I have many memories left to remind me, Lord Hawkhurst.' *Shame. Anger. Disappointment. Murder.*

He watched her carefully, the shadows in his eyes pulled back into puzzlement. With him at her side she felt completely safe, the stares of those around her muted in his company. She wished he would ask her to dance again as the music of a waltz was struck but, of course, he did not as they came into the little group she had left a good fifty minutes earlier. The young and beautiful Elizabeth Berkeley was again quick to take his arm. Aurelia thought she would have liked to have done the same, simply laid her fingers across such security and held on.

She remembered Freddy Delsarte at the parties at Medlands come Christmas, where the girls from London were brought up to satisfy the wants of married men who had long become bored of their wives.

As Charles had with her.

Closing her eyes, a dizziness that had become more frequent of late made her world spin.

'Are you quite well, Mrs St Harlow? You suddenly seem very pale.' Cassandra Lindsay's tone was worried.

'Just tiredness, I think,' Aurelia returned, looking at Leonora and Cassandra's brother on the dance floor enjoying each other's company.

'I could bring your sister back, if you would like, and Stephen could organise a carriage to take you home immediately. We will not be late ourselves and I promise you I would chaperon her as if she were my own daughter.'

The offer was tempting with Charles's friends watching her from one corner and the rest of the *ton* scowling from the others.

'If it would not be too much trouble...?'

Cassandra Lindsay's smile was bright as she bid Aurelia goodnight. Then she drew Elizabeth Berkeley away from her grip on Lord Hawkhurst's person with talk of the colour and cut of the gowns that were her very favourite in the room tonight.

Aurelia gained the distinct impression that in doing so the woman was helping her.

## *Chapter Four*

'I most certainly did not expect you to accompany me home, Lord Hawkhurst.'

He smiled, his teeth white in the dark of the carriage and his thighs less than an inch from her own. 'But I wanted to, Mrs St Harlow, because it will give us the chance to talk about how it is you know Lord Frederick Delsarte and his lackeys.'

'They were acquaintances of my husband.'

'But not of yours?' No humour lingered now, his voice cold, cut glass.

She shook her head. 'My disapproval of their antics was more than obvious, I should imagine.'

'Did Charles ever hurt you?'

The very intimacy of the question made her turn away. 'No. He was a wonderful husband.' The words were exactly those she had used in the courts when the law had tried to lay the blame at her feet for his unexplained death.

'Why is it that I think you lie?'

she turned back. 'I have no idea, my lord.'

The air all around them contained something that she had never felt before. The pure and utter longing for a man, this man, their unfinished kiss from a week before shimmering on the edge of a lust so foreign it made her feel light headed.

'Charles enjoyed a wide interpretation of the word "fairness" and when he died at Medlands there were probably a number of people both in London and further afield who breathed a sigh of relief to hear of his passing. As his wife you must have known this.'

Such criticism hung in the darkness, a living and breathing thing, defining all that Charles had been. Given that what he said held a great dollop of truth Aurelia found it hard to argue. 'There were also a number who may have mourned him.' She stated this with as much certainty as she could feign. Those who came up for the party weekends at a country mansion who held strict morals in little worth probably rued his passing, but she doubted there were many others. The Medlands estate had buried him with a smile upon its collective face, their lord and master a man who held little regard for the feelings and needs of others more lowly born than he was.

When Lord Hawkhurst caught her hand and held it tight, she could feel tremors within the strength—a surprising thing, that, given his easy confidence. The night of London was black and endless, a quarter-moon lost behind banks of cloud, leaving only them in the dark and empty space of the world.

The warmth of his skin comforted her though, a solid contact amidst all that was strange and she felt her fingers curl around his. He did nothing to resist.

'I would have asked you to dance again if I knew a scandal wouldn't have ensued because of it.'

She could not believe he would admit this, to her, a stranger. 'Lady Elizabeth Berkeley may not have been pleased about that,' she retorted, hating the bait she threw at him. It was beneath her to involve such an innocent young beauty for her own means, but there it was and she did not take it back. Rather, she waited.

'A title like mine, and the possessions accompanying it, have a way of garnering interest. It is a known fact.'

'Such is the ease of being wealthy.'

'Charles was rich, too. Perhaps you are more like Elizabeth Berkeley than you think.'

She did laugh at that, the sound lost into a mirth that was humourless. 'I cannot determine one trait that we might share, my lord.'

'What of beauty?' he replied.

Was this a joke he played upon her? 'I am hardly that, my lord.'

‘A woman who does not know her true worth is a rare and valuable thing.’ His voice allowed no tremor of falsity and when she turned towards him the breath left her body, his expression exactly the one she had seen at Taylor’s Gap: lust and want beaten back by will.

Breaking the contact, he fisted his palm against his thighs so that every knuckle stretched white. the scars on his knuckles stood out as raised edges of knotted flesh.

He swore soundly, the frustration expressed coursing between them. She should have bidden him to let her make the rest of the journey alone, should have replaced her gloves with a stern reprimand and ordered him from the carriage. But she could not. Instead she sat there, too, the silence growing as an ache, her hands bare in her lap and cold, her head heavy against the cushioned velour of the seat. For twenty-six long years she had imagined exactly this, a man who might transport her from the tight restraint of her life and deliver her into temptation.

His eyes glinted in the dark when she chanced to take a look, the bleakness in them shivering through green.

‘Your husband had questionable friends, Aurelia. Take care that they do not become your own.’

He would warn her even given the public perception of her part in Charles’s murder. Gratitude rose unbidden.

‘I live a simple and quiet life with my father and sisters. There is little in me that could be of interest to anyone.’

His laugh was menacing. ‘Somehow I doubt that entirely.’ The residual feeling existing between them since their kiss thickened. What on earth was happening to her? Hope drove into a veiled anger.

*He would never be hers.* It was written in exactly who she was. As she moved away carefully, the space between them became bathed in a pool of light reaching in from outside and when she saw that they were back in Upper Brook Street the relief was indescribable.

Braeburn House. The horses slowed to an amble and then stopped as Aurelia stretched the fabric of her unworn gloves out whilst deciding exactly what it was she would say. There were so many things that she might have told him, but in the end she settled on the one that would keep her family safe.

‘I relinquish you from any bargain that stands between us, my lord, and I realise that my insistence on an invitation to your ball was both forward and foolish.’ she enunciated the words very carefully and hoped that the need in her was not as visible as she thought it might be.

‘Your sister and Rodney Northrup may not say the same, Mrs St Harlow.’

The words were cold and stilted, none of the delight of the evening held within them, and as if to underline his desire to have her gone he simply leaned across to the door and flipped the handle, gesturing to one of his servants to help her alight.

He should not have been alone with her, jammed into the small space with the warmth of her skin and the rapid beat of her heart searing into all his good intentions. Aurelia St Harlow was his cousin’s widow and he was all but promised to Elizabeth Berkeley.

The anger in him grew along with a more unfamiliar frustration as he ran his fingers across his face, hating the way he was never able to hold them still. The night had left him wrung out and tired with the wax and wane of emotion and he still had a great deal of it to get through before everybody left. He wished that the hour was later and that the throng who danced and laughed in the Hawkhurst town house could have been gone, especially the Berkeleys. He did not have the energy to deal with Elizabeth’s unrelenting innocence in the light of his thoughts in the carriage, or the hopeful encouragement of her mother. He also knew that as the host he should not have left the party, but the opportunity for time alone with Aurelia St Harlow had been too enticing.

Cassandra Lindsay greeted him as he walked back into his downstairs salon a little time later.

‘Lady Elizabeth has been asking after you, Hawk. I said that I had seen you in conversation with Lord Calthorp and that you were heading towards the library.’

Sometimes, Hawkhurst felt Cassie knew a lot more than she let on.

'Business,' he returned and took a drink from one of the passing waiters as Nat and Lucas joined them.

'The St Harlow widow is gone, then?' Luc asked. 'She looked nothing like the sort of wife I imagined Charles to take.'

'What had you imagined?' Nathaniel asked the question and Stephen was glad for it.

'Someone of less substance, perhaps.'

'Leonora Beauchamp spoke very highly of the sister, too,' Cassie put in. 'There are two other younger sisters, by her account, who will be out in the next few years.'

'And the father?' Stephen did not want to ask the question, but found himself doing so.

'Sir Richard Beauchamp. He keeps to himself and seldom ventures into town. He is known as somewhat of an eccentric academic, a man of few words and little animation. Mrs St Harlow drives him around the park on a Monday afternoon straight after the luncheon hour, but they rarely stop to socialise with anyone.'

'I get the feeling she is not quite the woman that society paints her to be.' Lucas's smile was puzzled.

'If she wore a dress that showed off something of her very fine figure and a style that enhanced the vivid red of her hair she could be an original. Where on earth do you think she got the black gown? It looked like something a dowager would have worn back in the Regency days.' Cassandra addressed the query to Hawkhurst, who shrugged it off as he watched his uncle thread his way through the room to join them.

'I cannot find her anywhere, Stephen. Mrs St Harlow is quite gone.'

'That is because I ordered a carriage to take her home, Alfred.'

'Your man said that you were in it, too.' Opaque eyes glinted in the sort of wily knowledge few understood his uncle to have retained. He was pleased Elizabeth was speaking with her mother a little way off, though he knew from the flare in Cassie's eyes that she would make much of the revelation when she was able. Both Nat and Luc displayed no trace of hearing anything.

A careful neglect, he surmised, and turned his attention back to Elizabeth Berkeley as she joined them.

'Your ball is becoming the very crush of the Season, my lord. I have never in all my life seen so many of the *ton* in one place and dancing.'

Stephen smiled, Elizabeth's bright and happy reflection making him relax. 'Lady Lindsay and Mrs Clairmont had a great deal of say in the organisation. Any success owes more to their management than my own.'

'Mama says that it is a rare man who can inveigle so many to attend in the first place, and the supper was magnificent. Why, there are people here I have not seen venture out to any other soirée all Season.'

'The power of a fortune is not to be easily underestimated, Lady Elizabeth.' Nat's tone was laconic.

'I said exactly the same to my friends, Lord Lindsay, and they were all in agreement.'

'Then I rest my case.'

Elizabeth's fluster made Hawkhurst want to laugh, her innocence no match for the cynicism of his friend, but he did not because in the admission of such naivety another quandary rose unbidden. Could he really live for ever in the shadow of such unimpeachable trust without wanting more? The quick burst of risk? The enlivening rush of a gamble?

Leonora Beauchamp swept by them in the arms of Rodney Northrup at that very moment, all blond curls and youthful exuberance, the waltz giving them an excuse for closeness that no other dance managed to.

'She is so very pretty,' Elizabeth's mother tapped her fan closed against her arm. 'It is a shame that she comes tarnished by the reputation of her oldest sibling. My husband says if she had sense, Mrs St Harlow would leave society altogether and never return.'

Truth. How skewered it could become. Aurelia had risked everything for her sister's welfare and none would ever know of it. He smiled, for 'leaving society altogether' might have been her most ardent wish.

A group of Elizabeth's friends now stood beside her. He could tell that they had heard the words uttered about his cousin's widow because the look of agreement and gossip was written full on their faces. Excusing himself summarily, he went to find a drink.

Aurelia sat in the downstairs salon near the hallway on a chair that was hard and straight, waiting for Leonora to come home. It was later than Lady Lindsay had promised it would be and she felt an exhaustion rise up that made her bone-weary. The clock at the other end of the room pointed to the hour of one, and she knew John, their servant, was waiting and then he, too, could find his repose.

He had left the lights burning this evening at her request, which was an expensive luxury, and they both watched the shadows at the window, listening for a noise. Finally it came.

'They are here, ma'am.'

Nodding, she watched as he took a lamp and went out to greet the carriage. The laughter and the voices were joyful, Leonora's particularly so, as she bid her companions goodnight.

A few moments later her sister was back inside and the large front door was closed against the darkness.

'I have never in all my life had such a wonderful night,' she trilled, turning on the floor as though she was still dancing with an imaginary Rodney. 'Mr Northrup will come and call on us tomorrow, I am certain of it. Oh, Lia, you are the most caring sister in the whole world to have procured such an invitation for me.'

Her overt enthusiasm only had the effect of making Aurelia feel older and more tired and she was glad when Leonora bade them good evening and went to find the twins in their beds. To regale the whole episode to them, she supposed, and hoped that they would not wake Papa in their excitement.

John doused the flame of the lamp, his brow lined in worry.

'The young gentleman was adamant about shepherding Miss Leonora in until I told him that your father had been ill with the influenza, Miss Aurelia, but he seemed most anxious to visit.'

'Then let us hope he does not stay long.'

'I sometimes think, ma'am, that it is my family who has made everything impossible for you and that it would have been better had we just disappeared—'

She didn't let him finish. 'The court came to the conclusion that no one was to blame save Charles for his own death, John. It is my opinion that they were right.'

'Without your help they may have come to another decision altogether.' His face held the agony she had become accustomed to seeing there—an old man with the weight of secrets and sadness upon his shoulders. She recognised his anguish as the same emotion that crouched inside of her, waiting to pounce, biding its time.

'And any other decision would have been an erroneous one, given all the facts.'

The older servant bowed his head and nodded before going to check that the doors were fastened. He had aged considerably in the years since Charles had been dead, but then so had she, his influence still lingering long after his demise.

Of a sudden she felt light-headed and dizzy. She had not eaten anything at the Hawkhurst ball and had been too busy helping finish the last stitches in Leonora's gown to take succour at lunchtime, and here was a stranger who would be back knocking at the door of Braeburn House in only a matter of hours.

Had she made a huge mistake by petitioning Lord Hawkhurst for the invitations? She shook her head. No, there was nothing else she could have done and with careful management the whole thing could still work to their advantage for Leonora had been more than taken with Rodney Northrup.

It could have been a lot worse. Cassandra Lindsay's brother seemed a kind man and the influenza that John had mentioned was also inspired. No one would expect Papa to appear downstairs for a good week or two at least.

Looking around, she was pleased they had kept a hold of some of the better furniture, though there were places where more expensive artefacts had once languished. The missing pieces were her inheritance, mostly; she had been careful not to strip the house of those things Leonora, Harriet and Prudence held dear.

They were finally gone, the last of the guests on their way home at almost five in the morning. Hawkhurst imagined the first flush of dawn on the eastern horizon as he climbed the stairs to his bedroom on the first floor.

He had met his agent and exchanged the papers, easily and secretly. He had watched Delsarte and his group, too, for there were rumours of an involvement in clandestine activities that the British Service wanted some measure of. Aurelia's contretemps with Delsarte came to mind, his mission of watching the lord and his minions suddenly at risk. The personal and the professional were beginning to impinge on each other and he knew he would need to be more careful. Ten years of stellar service to his country were not to be taken away on a...whim. Hawk frowned at the word as he lay down, kicking off his shoes and watching the play of light and shadow outside through his undrawn curtains.

'*Aurelia St Harlow.*' He whispered the name into the darkness, listening to the sound of it return to him like some forbidden music.

Elizabeth Berkeley was softer and more familiar, yet it was not to the blond ringlets and pale eyes that his mind wandered as he remembered his cousin's widow writhing against him in the dusk.

He wanted to kiss Aurelia and feel again what he had once, the sharp and unexpected delight of lust surprising him, for it had been many a year since he had known the sort of quickness that she inspired. The anger at such a demented fantasy had him sitting upright.

She was a woman who was said to have killed his cousin and got away with it, the whispered gossip of society following her every step. She would be forever ostracized and dismissed. He breathed out with a heavy force of air, for years of being a rolling stone had worn him away, homeless and searching, the shadows now thick harbingers of all he had become. He needed the security of a warm and easy home. He needed goodness and humanity and mercy to heal his demons, crouched now closer than ever. Taylor's Gap had been a warning of his precarious state of mind and he knew he had to be more careful for with only a little push he might lose the touchstones altogether.

He opened a drawer on a small cabinet beside his bed and took out a box. A golden timepiece lay inside. His brother's. Stopped at the moment of his death. The claws of grief had him standing and he made his way to the seat by the window to watch the heavens, a distant glimmer of light claiming the darkness to the east as dawn finally broke.

Alone. For so long now. The burden of it all made worse by his need for an heir. He swore as the hallowed legends of the Hawkhurst family wrapped around his chest so tightly he found it hard to move. The scent of violets felt close and his leg ached in the early morning cold.

## Chapter Five

‘No, Papa, you have to eat your breakfast.’

Aurelia had had three hours’ sleep last night and she swallowed down irritation as her father refused to open his mouth, her eyes straying to the clock on the mantel. Eight o’clock already. She hoped Mr Rodney Northrup would not come calling until well into the afternoon, although she could already hear Leonora preparing herself for his visit.

‘I want to read, Lia. I want to sit and read.’ His hand came out and she smiled when warm fingers curled into her own. It had been two years since the father they had known had been largely swallowed up by a stranger that they did not, but sometimes like now there were the old glimpses of him.

‘Eat the egg, Papa, and then I will take you into the library.’

When he finally allowed her to feed him she breathed a sigh of relief. ‘Leonora has a beau coming to see her this afternoon. His name is Mr Rodney Northrup and he is a friend of Lord Hawkhurst.’ Aurelia always told him the news of the house each morning just in case he might take something in.

Prudence joined her after a few moments, her youngest sister’s face alight with anticipation, her hair a golden froth of curls.

‘Leonora says Rodney Northrup is the most handsome boy she has ever met, Lia. She says that he danced with her all night and sat close beside her in the carriage on the way home. She also mentioned that you had had a waltz with the menacing Lord Hawkhurst. Could you not have refused him?’

‘Hawkhurst?’ Her father spluttered the name. ‘Charles knew Hawkhurst?’

‘Indeed, Papa, he did.’

Prudence’s eyes widened. ‘Did Papa just understand us, Lia?’

Aurelia waited to see if her father would say more, but silence seemed to have claimed him again as he sat and fiddled with a spoon and a fork.

‘There are glimmers of comprehension still, Pru, although we have to expect that they will become fewer and further between, but enough of all this for now. Tell me, what is Leonora wearing today?’ The topic distracted her sister completely and as she talked excitedly about a silk gown trimmed with lace, Aurelia wandered her own pathway of thoughts.

Would Stephen Hawkhurst accompany Rodney Northrup? She hoped that he would not. *Please, God, let him not come*, she prayed over and over, jolted from her musings as her sister asked a question.

‘Did the invitation to Lady Lindsay’s country party include Harriet and me?’

‘As you have not even come out yet I should doubt it very much!’

‘But we are almost seventeen, Lia. Could we not at least plan a time when we should be able to accompany you to such things? We could borrow the older gowns Leonora no longer fits. It won’t be expensive.’

The plaintive tone in her voice had Aurelia taking a breath. When would it ever be easy? The silks were beginning to pay, but their debts were still substantial.

She should be at the warehouse now, sorting through fabric, but this visit by Cassandra Lindsay’s brother meant that she needed to be at home today, chaperoning her sisters as there was nobody else to do it.

As she closed her eyes the exhaustion she had felt last night was there again this morning so, after finishing her father’s leftover breakfast, she poured herself a glass of milk. If she became ill then the whole game was lost. One mistake and her father’s second cousin would be in to claim Braeburn House, leaving them homeless and penniless.

The horror of such a thing happening was not even to be considered and she stood to help her father back to the library. He did not understand what he read any more, but he enjoyed holding

the books. She would instruct his maid to keep him there until after the visitors had gone, influenza giving her a good excuse for his absence.

Rodney Northrup was accompanied by his sister and they arrived well into the afternoon.

They were all in the downstairs salon when they heard the sound of a carriage stopping. Prudence ran to the window to be roundly growled at by Leonora who wanted everything to be simply perfect. Harriet rolled her eyes at Aurelia as they all took their seats again and listened to the approaching voices.

He was not with them! Relief flooded into Aurelia's whole body. Hawkhurst had not come with his golden eyes, night-dark hair and menacing certainty. She unclenched her fists, removed her glasses and found herself smiling as Cassandra Lindsay and Rodney Northrup were shown into the room by John.

'I hope we did not keep you waiting at all.'

'You are right on time, Lady Lindsay,' Aurelia returned, her sentiment not echoed in the face of both Prudence and Harriet.

'Oh, please call me Cassie. All of my friends do.'

Without waiting for a reply she clasped Leonora's hands next. 'Rodney has been most keen to come today, my dear, and with you looking so pretty in pink I can well see why. Your two sisters mirror you in their pastel hues.' She waited as Aurelia introduced the twins, their curly blond hair catching the light from the window.

'I did not realise your sisters were almost all of the same age, Mrs St Harlow.'

'Prudence and Harriet are nearly seventeen. They will come out next Season.' Aurelia did not quite feel comfortable using Lady Lindsay's first name and so did not add anything else at all.

'And your father?'

'Is indisposed at the moment with the influenza. He is in bed and has been for the past few days.'

'Then let us hope he makes a good recovery with no lingering bad effects.'

In answer Aurelia smiled, the lies falling bald into the room between them. It had been so long since any stranger had set foot in Braeburn House and the need for lies made everything dangerous. Her eyes strayed to the clock. How long did one of these visits usually last for? She hoped it might be quick.

'I visited Mrs St Harlow and her sisters yesterday with Rodney, Hawk. Aurelia St Harlow is... unusual.'

Cassie's statement made both men turn from their seats in the corner of the St Auburn library.

'She wore the same dress we saw her in at your ball, which was interesting, though she had done away with the glasses. Her eyes are the most surprising of colours. Different shades,' she continued as neither her husband nor Stephen spoke. 'I wonder why she hides herself beneath yards and yards of shapeless black bombazine.'

Nat began to smile. 'What are you trying to tell us, Cassie?'

'Secrets linger in Mrs St Harlow's eyes like ghosts and she is careful with every single thing that she says. Charles, of course, was difficult, so that may be part of it. But there are other things, as well. The same servant who greeted us at the carriage after the ball last night took our coats, provided us with tea and showed us out.'

'You think they are short of money?' Hawkhurst made the observation.

'The house is furnished well and is one of the prettiest properties in all of Mayfair, so that possibility seems remote. There was an odd sound whilst we were there, though. A howling if I had to name it. Mrs St Harlow said that they had just taken over the care of a small puppy and were trying to train the animal. Her sisters looked less than comfortable with the explanation, however, and I got the feeling they were relieved to see us go. Not Leonora, of course. Rodney and she existed in a space all of their own and I have never seen my brother so happy.'

'Is it wise to encourage him, do you think?' Nat asked the question.

‘You refer to Mrs St Harlow’s past, no doubt, and the unfortunate accident at Medlands.’

‘It was widely known that they were not happy. Charles had apparently said something of his wife expressing her desire for his early demise not long before he died. His friends testified that she harassed and badgered him all of the time, a woman who was never content with all the gifts that he was showering upon her. By all accounts from the London jewellers and suchlike, there were many.’

‘Which friends?’ Stephen joined in the conversation.

‘Freddy Delsarte and his cronies were amongst their number, if I recall.’

‘Delsarte waylaid Mrs St Harlow at the ball. She had bruises on her wrist from his grip.’

‘Perhaps he is another of her disenchanted lovers, then. The parties they held at Medlands were notorious.’ Nat used a tone that was unusual. Stephen had heard the same cadence when information was being extracted from a difficult informant, the undercurrents of deception held within.

‘I thought it brave of her to even attend, Hawk.’ Cassie’s voice resonated with a definite query.

‘She has three sisters to marry off. That would make a warrior out of any woman.’ Hawkhurst remembered her antics above Taylor’s Gap.

‘Yet she makes no effort at all to give her side of the story. If she was pardoned by the courts, she must be innocent.’

‘Or she had a good lawyer,’ Nathaniel interjected and Stephen could hear his impatience with the whole thing. ‘Charles was a man who none of us liked and Mrs St Harlow is a woman whom society detests. Perhaps they suited each other entirely.’

‘I don’t think I detest her,’ Cassie interrupted. ‘I think, under other circumstances, we might have been friends. You had a waltz together, Hawk. What do you make of her character?’

*She kisses well and goes to pieces on the smallest of caresses.*

He wondered what would be said should he voice such things and remained quiet.

‘I barely know her.’ Stephen did not wish to be drawn into Cassandra’s wiles by admitting more and when the conversation meandered on to other topics, he was pleased.

On Monday afternoon, despite willing himself not to, Hawk found himself in the park watching for the conveyance containing Aurelia St Harlow and her father. Why he did not just dismiss the woman from his notice was beyond his understanding but there it was, logic lost beneath a will that had forgotten what was good for him.

He did not have long to wait before they came, Aurelia in her black bombazine with a matching hat and her father tucked in beside her in the open landau. She chatted and laughed, the driver on the front box dressed in the livery of the stables complex in Davies Mews and the horses a well-matched pair of greys.

The senior Beauchamp must be a gifted conversationalist, Stephen thought, as he caught her laughter on the wind, for he had never seen Aurelia St Harlow look so animated. He hated the way his body responded to the sound and bit down in irritation.

Below this thought, however, another one less generous tumbled, born from his years of observing people closely, he supposed, and from a lifetime of finding the wrong in things.

He could not see her father’s lips moving in the spaces when his daughter did not speak and though he craned forward to watch more closely as they returned around the path for a second time, he was beginning to get the feeling that the gaiety of this carriage ride was a sham.

For whom? His eyes took in various lords and ladies gracing the park, the busiest time of the day, and although other conveyances slowed down to speak to those who might hail them, the Beauchamp carriage maintained a steady speed and a one-sided conversation for three whole passes around.

Then it simply left, gliding through the gates with all the grace of a completed outing, the horses perfectly in time and undoubtedly barely stretched.

Would Aurelia St Harlow never stop surprising him and why would she be bent on such a show?

Rodney Northrup chose that moment to saunter over towards him. The lad looked happier than he had looked for a long while and Hawk guessed his joyous admiration of Miss Leonora Beauchamp to have some hand in such newly found cheerfulness.

‘Lord Hawkhurst. I have not seen you here before at this hour of the day. You have just missed Mrs St Harlow and her father. They left not more than a brace of minutes ago.’

Stephen decided to play along. ‘I had heard they frequented the park on a Monday. I expect you were here to catch sight of the sister...Leonora, is it not?’

‘Oh, Miss Leonora never accompanies them. It is always just Mrs St Harlow and her father.’

‘I see,’ Stephen returned. And he did.

With only the two of them in the carriage no one would stop to talk. Curious acquaintances would be a danger to any hidden secret and as Aurelia so religiously rebuffed anyone who might offer more than a glance, she and her father stayed safe from closer attention. Was Braeburn House entailed? No one had seen Richard Beauchamp in any company save that of his daughter in years. Could Aurelia St Harlow have kept any intimation of her father being ill a secret to protect the inheritance of her three unmarried sisters? Such a shield was exactly the sort of thing he knew she might have held on to, safeguarding any change detrimental to her siblings’ chance of a good marriage. Braeburn House was a prosperous address and the affluent and moneyed of the *ton* would easily be impressed.

He wished then that he might have stepped forwards and seen what it was she would have done. Part of him imagined the driver to be instructed by her to merely run down anyone who had the effrontery to approach them. Hawkhurst swallowed back chagrin and listened to Rodney.

‘Cassie said that You should be receiving an invitation to her party and that you were to make sure you come. You have missed many of her soirées, she said, and she wants you to be at this one.’

Normally he had no interest in such gatherings and avoided them like the plague, but she had mentioned the same celebration to Mrs St Harlow at his ball and by her account the invitation had been accepted.

He shrugged and looked away, watching as other carriages pulled up and down the concourse and wishing he might see the only one that had caught his attention return.

Aurelia had seen Hawkhurst standing against a gate on the path on the far side of the park. She knew it was he by his stance and the breadth of his shoulders and by an awareness that disturbed every part of her no matter what distance lay between them.

Nerves had made her more animated than she usually was as his eyes had followed the coach, once, twice, three times around the track. He had spoken to no one as he had observed them, but his indolence belied a quieter interest. She made certain that she had turned her head away from him each time they had come closer, not wanting to see his eyes shadowed with questions.

Rodney Northrup had approached him right at the end of her time there, his happy uncomplicated demeanour such a direct contrast to Stephen Hawkhurst’s complexity.

Papa had spoken only occasionally, a man who would loathe such a spectacle of deception were he to know of it. She was only pleased he did not close his eyes and sleep as he did now for much of the time at home—his way, she supposed, of dealing with a world he no longer had any comprehension of. Or howl at something that frightened him.

The muscles in her cheeks ached from fixing a smile with such an unrelenting pressure and she bit down upon worry. Every week she hoped that they would not be waylaid by some well-meaning soul, some acquaintance with enough curiosity to uncover all that she sought to hide.

The walk home from the stables in Davies Mews was becoming a more harried pathway each time they traversed it. She could not be sure that her father could manage any of it for much longer, his gait more laboured and slower every Monday afternoon.

Tears pricked the back of her eyes and she willed them away, useless emotional baggage that she had dispensed with years ago. She was the only one who might see this family through to a secure

future and with the growing profits she was garnering from the silks it would only be a matter of months before safety would be gained.

Hawkhurst carried a cane today and he had leant upon it with more than a gentle force. Had he been wounded recently or was this an older injury? A great part of her wished that she might have been able to stop and speak with him and pretend that just for a moment she was a high-born lady of consequence who would have made him a perfect wife.

Such an illusion was shattered completely when they gained the stables and the master of the books strode forwards to tell them that as the cost of an afternoon rental had just been increased he could no longer keep a carriage free if the payment was not given monthly.

So many pounds, Aurelia thought, adding the sum in her head. She still had the diamond pendant, though, and the pawnbrokers had offered her a sum that would see the charade through to at least October. By then she was certain the new lucrative contracts she had garnered would be trickling through.

‘This way, Papa,’ she encouraged her father as he turned in the wrong direction.

Uncoupling her pendant, she held it tightly in her hand, liking the feel of the warm and familiar shape of the piece against her skin. Her grandmother had given the necklace to her on her deathbed—it was a treasured family heirloom.

There was a pawnshop in the city that favoured the older style of jewellery. She would visit it tomorrow.

## Chapter Six

Alexander Shavvon was unhappy as he paced up and down the small room.

‘France needs to be contained and yet all information suggests otherwise, for already Louis Napoleon has expanded into IndoChina. If Lord Palmerston is not careful the *Entente Cordiale* fashioned under Guizot will return to bite the hand of the one that feeds it.’

Hawkhurst was not as certain as Shavvon of the direction of Francophile expansionism and fault. ‘If I were determining policy, I would be keeping an eye on Prussia and the Germanic states, sir. All of my reading suggests the prospect of a United Germany, which would be a lot harder to contain than a beaten France.’

‘Your uncle, of course, might not agree with you, Lord Hawkhurst. He knew first-hand the might of Napoleon and if we had not defeated the dictator at Waterloo, England would be a very different place now.’

‘Perhaps it is becoming that different place already.’

‘Talk to Alfred and see just what it is France is capable of and you might change your mind. You are too young to remember the fear engendered by our nearest neighbour in the Peninsular Campaigns, but it was a hit-and-miss affair as to which way it went and the British would never again wish for the like.’

Such stilted discourse made Stephen wary and he knew that his days in the clutches of the British Service were numbered. He had ceased to be a citizen of the brokered threat Lord Palmerston seemed to endlessly foster and all he wanted was the chance to head to one of his remote family estates and live life.

Well and quietly, walking into a future with nothing tied back into the past. Nothing sordid and chancy and dissolute!

He breathed out hard as the face of Aurelia St Harlow came to mind. She wandered into his dreams at night, too, now, when his mind was least resistant and the call of her body against his at its most apparent, the generous heaviness of her bosom well remembered. Swearing under his breath, he concentrated again on what was being said by Shavvon.

‘Frederick Delsarte and his mob have been seen hanging around a warehouse in Park Street in the Limestone Hole area and they have known associations in Paris. It seems they may be using the legalised trade of cloth to send and receive information.’ He handed Stephen a sheet of paper with the details on it. ‘Those who are helping him do so probably have some French connection and imagine themselves hard done by by the English Government. If we can catch them in the act, we can string them up, quietly, of course, and with as little public awareness as possible.’

Hawkhurst nodded. It was always the same, this game of espionage played out behind the scenes of a virtuous and wholesome society, the dark secrets of corruption snapped off before they had the chance to taint it.

His world.

Sometimes he wondered if he would ever truly be able to struggle back up into the one people like Elizabeth Berkeley inhabited, untouched by any iniquity.

‘If you can manage to get into the channel of communication, let me know before you shut it down.’

‘So you have time to turn the other cheek?’

Shavvon began to laugh. ‘You are the best agent we have, Hawkhurst. I don’t want you lost.’

Lost like his brother and all the others he had started with. For a while now Stephen had wished the end would come, quickly, in the shape of a bullet, neither painful nor lingering, just a true clear shot and then nothing. If Shavvon recognised such ennui, he did not say so as he turned to the pile of

papers on his desk. Expedience had the look of a careless nonchalance and Hawkhurst was so very tired of it, this lie of his life, foundering in the shallows of evil.

'One day soon I will not be back.' The words were quietly said as he let himself out.

Henry Kerlake was late and worry gnawed as Aurelia waited for him. It was cold and what light there was would soon begin to fade. If he did not come within the half hour she would leave for home, for her father had been ill this morning and she was wanting to see that the fever he had woken with had not worsened.

Her teeth bit at her nails and she fisted her fingers when she realised what she was doing. Agitation had marked many areas of her body now, she thought—her hands, her stomach with a constant nervous ache and her face, the tension written deeply into lines of ugliness.

*Beautiful.* Hawkhurst had called her such, but he was a man who had wanted more when he said it and what male would not use falsity in such a situation?

She shook her head hard at this errant nonsense for where was such an idea leading? She had been mortified by both her reaction to his kiss at Taylor's Gap and her heightened sense of Hawkhurst as he had sat with her in the carriage. Charles's betrayals were stretched thin across the veneer she had so successfully erected and she knew that any break would destroy everything in the same way that it had once before.

The sweet smell of opium smoke curling from a pipe and Charles's eyes upon her, glittering bright and furtive. She had allowed him the right to pull the gown away from her breasts so that flesh spilled out into the air, cold in the autumn evening. She had trusted her husband, relied on his honour and his principles, the band of gold around his finger denoting all that she had promised him.

Foolish false troths. It had taken her only one night to understand his depravity.

The noise of feet made her turn and, as the door opened, she saw that Henry Kerlake had finally arrived. He looked distracted and tired, the large bag he carried over his shoulder rubbing a dent into his over-cloak.

'The jacquards took longer than I had imagined they would to sample. Although the punched cards make the patterns more intricate, they are slow to set up.' Opening the buckles on the bag, he brought out a swathe of cloth, flowers and leaves that owed much to the influence of Japan spilling forth.

'Godwin had his hand in the design, Mrs St Harlow, but I have strengthened the colours myself. What do you think?'

'The stylised motifs are...unusual, though the Oriental taste is gaining in attraction.' To her eye the shades were too lurid and the shapes too foreign, but her own Louis schemes garlanded in blossom were falling in demand and she knew that they had to widen their range.

'No one else in Macclesfield is doing anything like it yet, so if we hit the market quickly we will be ahead of them all.'

His sentiment heartened her. With the mooted reopening of the trade routes to Japan, interest in the East had escalated and the furniture being turned out by eminent manufacturers reflected the change. She had begun to see bamboo used in the new mass-produced chairs and tables, something silk patterns such as these ones would complement exactly and she was enough of a businesswoman to understand the necessity of diversity.

Renaissance splendour, Gothic arches, gilded rococo boiseries, French roses and now a simpler lightness from a country far from Europe. Her own designs stood alongside those from the more famous houses, but with the limited time she had to produce them she was beginning to depend on Henry and his 'fashionable finds' more and more. The thought concerned her, for if she lost control, everything would be forfeited.

There was nothing to be done, however, and as a woman she was bound to use a man as a front-person no matter how liberal-minded those she was doing business with purported to be. Victorian

sensibilities could not be changed in a moment, even though the rumblings of emancipation were beginning to be heard more plainly.

Not for her, though, the luxury of free hours to pursue a lofty cause all in the name of womanhood. Time was her enemy and had been for a long while, though she was becoming most adept at using it more effectively.

‘Put the Little Street Mill into the production of the Japanese-patterned silks and keep the Chester Street Mill producing the French-styled roses.’

Henry Kerslake did not look pleased. ‘You might regret not moving more quickly upon this matter, Mrs St Harlow.’

Irritation bloomed at his criticism, but the relationship between her and Henry Kerslake had been foundering just as certainly as their profits had been increasing. Another few months and she could sell the business at a good advantage. Aurelia was more and more desperate for that time to come.

‘I met a man on the way in who was asking questions about the sort of cargo we bring in here each month. I told him what I knew and he went on his way.’

‘Did he talk to others around here as well?’

‘I don’t know.’

Aurelia felt rattled by the news. A few of her designs had gone missing lately as had a book of invoices detailing payments pending, the new contracts secured detailed in pounds and pence. Could this person have had something to do with that? Perhaps another mill was on the prowl to see what it was they were to produce next. They had been lucky in their choices of design so far and mayhap this had been noticed by a less successful venture.

Some mills had failed even in the four years she had been in business, their warehouses empty and still, the slumps and booms that were so much a part of the English silk industry taking their toll. She wished there could have been someone to talk over these problems with, someone to give her guidance and advice, but her father’s mind had long since dwelt in a place where no one could reach him and her three sisters’ world encompassed none of this. Realising she was again biting her nails, Aurelia stopped. She would place sturdier locks on all of the doors and pray that such measures would be sufficient deterrent.

Henry Kerslake was not quite finished, however. ‘The stranger had that unmistakable air of wealth about him, if you ask me, Mrs St Harlow.’

Shock reverberated through her. ‘What did he look like?’

‘Tall with dark hair and he moved in the way of a man who knows exactly where he is going.’

*Lord Hawkhurst?* Could it possibly be him? Had he been making enquiries about her that had led him back here? Danger made her breath shallow, although underneath some other small feeling blossomed quietly. She might see him again. He could be here right now, outside somewhere watching. Her glance went to the window, but there was only stillness, the grounds around the warehouse empty.

Fingering the silk on the table before her, she tried to settle back into some sort of work, but the colours and patterns swam into nothingness and all she could see were the golden eyes of a man who had begun to invade her night-time thoughts.

She was therefore pleased when Henry looked at his timepiece and packed up his things, in preparation for a meeting in town with one of the suppliers of buttons.

‘I have left orders in the box for you to sort through, Mrs St Harlow. Dickens & Jones want extras of the fine, blue, handmade shawls for their shop in Regent Street. Perhaps we might need to employ more staff at Chester Street to cope?’

Aurelia winced. Another problem that she would have to deal with quickly. Was there no end to her worries today? She was pleased when Kerslake left and a rare silence enfolded her.

She did not feel like working, fidgety nervousness making her stand, a prickling feeling raising the fine hair on her forearms. She was still at the window a few moments later when a knock on the door took her attention. Thinking it to be Kerslake, she opened it, but it was not him, and the air that she had just breathed in congealed at the back of her throat.

## *Chapter Seven*

Mrs Aurelia St Harlow stood before him, a swathe of scarlet silk in her hands and wearing the same black dress Stephen had seen her in every time he'd met her.

'You?' Her voice could not have been more shocked, her mismatched eyes widened and fearful. 'What are you doing here?'

Hawkhurst had to smile at that because the question was exactly the one he was about to ask her and because there was no earthly reason why a well-to-do lady should be lurking in the run-down buildings on the back streets of the Limestone Hole warehouses.

Save one.

'You work here?' Everything had just got a whole lot harder and the mission he had been sent on by the Service was in danger of being compromised entirely. His glance took in the bolts of fabric and the squares of colours and designs that littered a large wooden table in the middle of the room. Ledgers were piled up five high in a bookcase beside it and further off in one corner a dog stood chained to the wall, his teeth bared in grisly defiance.

'Down, Caesar!' The animal crouched uncertainly at her command, flecks of spittle around its jawline. Stephen got the feeling that if it could forsake its chains it would be at his throat in an instant; much like its mistress if the look on Aurelia St Harlow's face was anything to go by.

'A nice pet,' he drawled and stayed where he was.

'Protection,' she returned, the anger in her eyes boding badly. She neither asked him inside nor shut the door to keep him out.

An impasse. The sky solved the situation by suddenly opening, rain scudding in the wind towards them across the line of brick buildings drenching everything, and she allowed him through. The dog rose again on its haunches at his movement forwards, a low growl filling the room.

'He is not used to visitors.'

'I will stand by the door, then.'

'It might be wise.' When she smiled briefly the lines of worry melted into radiance and he drew in breath. God, Aurelia St Harlow's beauty held a sensuality that always surprised him and, doffing his hat, he placed it in front of his tight trousers, the effect she had on his anatomy singular and strong. Irritation mounted.

'I cannot remember my cousin delving into silks.'

'That is because he didn't.'

'You are saying this is your doing?'

'My father's family have manufactured silk buttons for a hundred years. It is in the Beauchamp blood.'

'And he approves?'

The quick tilt of her head worried him. She looked momentarily disappointed.

'Women these days are less likely to seek authorisation from the men around them, Lord Hawkhurst, for there is a new movement afoot that allows for women's emancipation. My late husband would have been more than horrified at any such thought, but there it is; I can work in any field of industry that I am competent in and no one can stop me.'

'Indeed?' The idea was beginning to occur to him that she was the most fearless female he had ever met. He could not even begin to imagine ladies such as Elizabeth Berkeley and her ilk secreting themselves in such a dangerous part of London with an animal who probably had feral wolf in its bloodlines.

A grimmer thought also surfaced.

Could she be the one sending information to France through the textile channels from England? His agent had been most specific that this office was the one from which the package of coded information had first come. He changed his tack entirely.

‘Cassandra Lindsay was impressed by Leonora. She imagines her youngest brother to be in love.’

‘Are you warning me, my lord?’

Hawkhurst felt a glimmer of respect for a woman who picked up so very quickly on the things said beneath other words. ‘The marriage of your sister into a family of great note is something you have your heart set on. Nathaniel, however, would not thank me if there were secrets in the Beauchamp household that would cause even the slightest consternation to his wife. Or to his name.’

‘There are not.’

Her scent filled the room, the particular aroma of violets and freshness.

‘Yet I am trying to understand why a lady of means might wish to spend her days in a dusty warehouse sorting silks.’

Colouring, she looked away, guilt marking the movement.

His cousin’s widow had French blood, giving her the will to help a country that was her mother’s. She had told him her mother’s nationality when he had first met her. The money in the business of secrets could also be substantial. Charles’s estate had been sizeable as had her father’s family’s, but perhaps there was more at stake than riches. English society had in effect thrown her out on her head at the unexplained death of her husband and revenge was sweet in anyone’s language.

Ice formed in his veins.

‘It is most unusual for a woman of society to be involved in such endeavours.’

‘Oh, one gets tired of tapestry and crossstitch, my lord, and as I always liked design I thought to try my hand at something more challenging.’

‘You did not think to do this in a more conducive setting.’ He looked pointedly at the dog.

‘I am quite safe, Lord Hawkhurst, despite all you might think.’

‘Do you work here alone?’

‘No. There are two of us. My partner in the business, Mr Kerslake, has just left.’ A blush darkened her cheeks.

‘Kerslake is the man I spoke to earlier, I presume?’ She nodded at his question and remained silent as he remembered the fellow. Ambitious. Good looking.

Damn. Perhaps there was more than a working relationship between them, ensconced as they were in a room far from the watchful eyes of others.

Her hair was uncovered today and the red in it was astonishing. He wanted to cross the space between them and hold the colour to the light, a flame of scarlet much the same shade as the silk trailing from her fingers. Here in the docklands, she was as far from the woman he had kissed as she could be, independence and the uncompromising strategies of business guarding any softer words.

She wanted him gone, too. He could see this from the way she tapped her foot against the floor, like a musician might measure the time in a song until it was finished.

‘I would prefer it, my lord, if you could keep the knowledge of my small concern here to yourself.’ She breathed out a deep sigh to punctuate her dilemma, her brow heavily creased and her shoulder drooping.

‘And why should I do that, Mrs St Harlow?’

‘Society finds unconventional women...perturbing. And it has been my experience that what they don’t understand they generally also do not like.’ The tone of her voice mimicked that of Elizabeth’s friends, breathless and wavering. He laughed, the sound filling the room around them and the vulnerable and dejected air of a second ago disappeared into plain anger as her eyes flinted.

Hawkhurst swore under his breath. A self-effacing timid demeanour did not suit Aurelia St Harlow at all, this Boadicea of the Victorian drawing rooms who fought for an advantageous alliance

for her younger sister despite a reputation that would have kept others as far from any public communion as they could go.

'I like you better when you do not simper, Mrs St Harlow.'

A half smile crept up on to full rounded lips. One small curl had escaped the confines of her tightly bound hair and fell across her throat on to the generous curve of her bosom. He drew his eyes back to her face, feeling like he had as a green boy, caught in the act of ogling. But she was not yet finished with plying her sister's case. This time there was no tone of supplication evident at all.

'Lady Lindsay is more than willing to consider the match and any intervention from you could only harm a relationship which both my sister and Mr Northrup wish to pursue.'

'The dubious woes of star-crossed lovers are hardly my concern!' He hated the cynicism he could hear so plainly, but he was a man who did not like the unexplained, and so far everything about Mrs St Harlow confused him.

She worked in a warehouse and lived in one of the most expensive town houses in Mayfair, a residence well furnished and appointed according to Cassie Lindsay; yet her hands were marked with the vestiges of a labour that had nothing at all to do with her confessed design work on light silk.

'I saw you the other day in the park with your father. The greys were very fine.'

'The enjoyment of good horseflesh is one of Papa's passions.'

She took a breath and held it, her fingers laced together in a tight white line. At breaking point, he deduced, the pulse of a vein in her throat denoting tension.

'Indeed, he looked most amused by the conversation. Almost too amused, were I to place a point upon it.'

'I do not know what you mean, my lord.'

'Are the Beauchamp properties entailed?'

The very blood simply went from her face, one moment flushed and the next pale.

'Did Cousin James send you here?'

He laughed at that. 'Nothing so prosaic, I am afraid, though I am guessing that this man is the one your father's title and lands will pass to when he dies or if he is no longer capable of performing his expected duties.'

To that she made no response.

'Charles was a wealthy man and a generous one by all accounts. Surely, as his wife, you did very well on his death?'

Again she remained quiet.

'I can hear it from you, Aurelia, or I can instruct my lawyers to look into my cousin's accounts. I would prefer it if you told me.'

After a few seconds she began to speak, softly at first, but then gaining in volume. 'My husband's estate was mortgaged up to the hilt. I have been trying to pay back the creditors I personally took food and services from ever since he died.'

Suddenly he understood. 'With the money gained from silk?' Lord, why had he not guessed? She had worn the same serviceable dress nearly every time he had met her and the gifts of jewellery from Charles which Nat had spoken of were never anywhere in sight. Today, even the pendant he had seen about her neck every other time he had met her was gone. Unwillingly, he supposed. Her fingers had crept to her throat on several occasions during the conversation, dropping to her sides when they discovered the loss. Had she pawned the piece for quick cash?

'There are two mills in Macclesfield and the warehouse here in Park Street. The trade is beginning to be profitable and will continue to stay so if I can only...' She petered out, the words simply stopping on her tongue.

'Keep your father's state of health a secret?'

The shock in her eyes was underlined by fear as she stepped back. He had the feeling that she might have been planning to simply walk out of the door, but had then thought better of it, choosing instead to defend herself with words.

‘A lord contemplating jumping from a cliff to solve the problems of the world that ailed him might be perceived by any business partners as a risk.’

‘Touché!’

He tried to keep his tone light, an airy unconcern visible, but underneath another truth rose into life. She would sacrifice herself for her father and for her family and if anyone got in her way...?

‘You would spread such a lie?’

‘It depends on whether you interpret my father’s sickness as influenza or dementia.’

An ultimatum of protection. There was some damned fine sense of poignancy in such a stance and in his line of business it had been a while since he had met another who might do the same.

She knew she had made a mistake as soon as he drew back, but there was nothing she could do about any of it. He would hate her now, that much at least was obvious, the lighter play between them dissolved in the message of her threat.

*Ruin me and I will ruin you!*

She loathed herself for even thinking to use such a warning and yet the faces of those she supported came to mind: Papa, Leonora, Harriet and Prudence, and John with his wife Mary.

And in Paris... Aurelia shook her head. No, she would not dwell on this now, a man who seemed to read her very mind standing before her.

Twenty-six and forever adrift from society.

‘If it is money you need...’

She broke into his words even before he had finished them, unwilling to hear the offer. ‘I need only your confidence, Lord Hawkhurst.’ The dog growled at her tone.

‘Then you have it.’ His words were clipped short and he was gone even before she had time to answer. As the door shut behind him, Aurelia closed her eyes. He had looked at her as if she were... unknown, the undercurrents between them disappearing into simple loathing. The ache of it stabbed quick for in the nights after everyone had found their beds and the moon was high she had dreamed there might be something finer, something real and right and true. As she shook her head hard, the betrayal of hope was a timely reminder of why she had not sought out the company of others in the years since Charles’s accident.

The shaped sharp end of the oak branch had pointed upwards, all the intentions of death in its careful placement. The brush before the jump had been so precisely angled, hiding everything, and she had been most vigilant in shielding John from the heavy hand of the law when it was determined he was the last person to be seen in the vicinity. The questions had come, of course, but the true answers had been lost in the interim, clues to the truth gone for ever and only conjecture left.

Sitting at the table, she unlocked a drawer at the very bottom of her desk and drew out a pouch of leather wrapped in silk. She knew that Lord Hawkhurst had not been here for a casual or idle chat; she had seen it in his stance and heard it in all the things he had not said.

*‘Ahh, mon Dieu, qu’est-ce que je fais maintenant?’*

*Oh, my God, what should I do now?*

Drawing out the newest missive from Paris, Aurelia understood the need to be even more careful than she usually was when she passed the letter on.

She remembered Sylvienne’s wide and frightened eyes when they had last met in Paris, the furtive looks across her shoulder as her mother had explained she did not feel safe.

Freddy Delsarte had been there, of course, his own brand of cunning gleaming in his eyes, the secrets of the daughter of a well-respected and wealthy English gentleman pointing to a lucrative blackmail.

Another responsibility. A further problem. Aurelia felt as though she was a tightrope walker poised on a thin rope above chaos and despair.

## *Chapter Eight*

Aurelia met Stephen Hawkhurst in the library in Bond Street on Tuesday morning, almost falling over him as she rounded one aisle. His height and strength in the smallness of Hookham's seemed out of place here, a warrior amidst the formality of Society's quieter pursuits.

She wished she had worn her light blue dress, as even to her own uncritical eye the black bombazine did her skin little favour. Pushing such ridiculous vanity aside, she waited, for after their conversation at Park Street there could be little he wanted to say to her ever again.

'I hope your father's influenza is abating, Mrs St Harlow.'

So that was how he would play it. She felt her cheeks flush red. 'Indeed it is, my lord.' Her hands clutched a book of flowers drawn as lithographs on to thin tissue and further afield she noticed a couple of women looking their way.

Nay, his way, she amended, their expressions having the same sort of interest she had perceived on most of the female guests at his ball.

When he beckoned her to follow him towards the end of the room she went uncertainly, pleased that the onlookers were blocked from her view by a tall shelf.

'I have been giving the...situation with your father some thought.'

Shaking her head, she turned to leave, but he caught her arm and held it, the grip of his fingers allowing her to go nowhere.

'Could you speak with your cousin and gain his approval in ensuring your family's living situation is more stable? Surely if such a thing were to leave you destitute the man might consider such an action.'

'Or he might throw us out tomorrow.'

'He seems reasonable enough.'

'You have checked up on him?' Horror and anger made her voice rise a good few octaves.

'Mr James Beauchamp has a name for being a fair and equitable man.'

'No.'

'He is also a friend of Rodney Northrup's.'

'One can be a respected man or a beloved friend and still have a penchant for that which has never been enjoyed.'

'From where I stand there seems more than enough to share and I am certain your family would be relieved to see you at home a little more often.'

'No.' The single word was louder this time as she broke off contact between them, danger sprouting from such intransigence. Did Lord Stephen Hawkhurst really expect just to waltz into her life and change it as if it were a knitting pattern, easy and simple? She knew what would happen next. Of course she did. If Mr James Beauchamp came to the house in the guise of a distant cousin inclined to help, everything would change.

They would all have to be grateful to him and the whims of an unmarried twenty-seven-year-old man might include the wish for a wife. Then Leonora or Prudence or Harriet would be sacrificed for the greater good of the family, and each of them would go without a whimper to protect her. She knew this as truly as she knew the night followed the day because all year the whispers she heard when the others thought she was not listening had been about their worries for her.

*Aurelia works too hard. If only we could find a way to help her.*

Well, the silks were beginning to pay and the new completed designs were beautiful and different. Another few months and everything would be possible. the only tripping block stood before her in Hookham's lending library in the large form of the implacable Lord Stephen Hawkhurst and he did not look pleased.

'How many other sisters do you have?'

‘Two. Prudence and Harriet are twins.’

‘Do they look like you?’

‘No. They are much prettier, for they favour Leonora and—’

A ripe swear word broke off her sentence.

‘Charles was a man who appreciated beauty in women. Surely he let you know of the qualities in yourself that he admired?’

‘Oh, indeed he did.’ She took away the sting in the words by sheer dint of will. He admired women who would do things in the bedroom that even prostitutes in the East End of London might have blushed at and he had simply abandoned her on his estate in the far north when she had refused to take part in any of it. Even the servants he had left her with had been instructed to be of as little help as possible until she came around to understanding what the words ‘I promise to obey’ meant in their hastily completed marriage.

The first few nights alone had been the worst. After that she had thanked the Lord for the distance between her new abode and her new husband and for the independence that naturally followed. Aye, her freedoms had been hard won and she was not about to give them up now to anyone.

‘Such problems are mine to solve, my lord.’ Aurelia could barely get the words out, so desperate was she to escape, and the headache she had had all morning began to play upon her vision. ‘The silk trade is shaping up well and in a few months I am certain I shall be—’

‘Dead and buried by the looks of the dark rings beneath your eyes.’

Glancing down, she resisted the urge to lift her fingers to her face. She had hardly slept for days, the difficulty of everything increased somehow by all the consequences of the Hawkhurst ball. Leonora and Rodney. Cassandra Lindsay and her invitation to a country-house party. The carriage ride home where she had understood for the first time in her life what it was to be attracted to a man.

Not just any man, either, but this one before her, his eyes filled with certainty.

‘What if Lady Lindsay brought your sisters out and I footed the bill?’

Aurelia could not believe what she had just heard and shock made her step back.

‘I could never accept such an offer.’

‘Why not? You were married to my cousin and as the head of the Hawkhurst family I would be most remiss to leave you floundering financially as a widow.’

‘I am hardly a relative you might be expected to nurture, my lord, and people would talk.’

‘They talk now, Aurelia.’

His eyes were softened in the grey light of a gloomy London afternoon and she thought he had never looked more beautiful.

‘I should tell you that Cassandra Lindsay broached the subject with me yesterday. She has met your sisters, apparently, and was most impressed by them.’

‘Oh.’ The wind was taken from her sails as she tried to decide exactly what to do.

Turning away, she looked out of the window, a squally rain shower pushing a stray sheet of paper down the street. Once, she would have accepted such help with barely a backward thought. Once, hopes and dreams had been written in her eyes just as they were now in Leonora’s, and the future had looked bright. She had worn colourful gowns, then, gowns to highlight the shade of her hair and the dashing Mr Charles St Harlow, newly returned from The Americas, had been entranced.

For all of a month. The anger in her grew with the shame.

‘Would Lady Elizabeth Berkeley not find such patronage odd, given you are already promised to her in marriage?’

‘Who told you that?’

‘Lady Lindsay herself. At your ball.’

A single muscle rippled in his jaw, but he did not speak.

‘I do not wish to make matters difficult for you, but if I agree to such a thing it would only be on the grounds that I would pay you back.’

‘Very well.’

‘When I sell my silk business. I would write out a vowel, of course, though I understand if you would prefer to involve a lawyer...’

‘I wouldn’t.’

Flustered at the clipped tone in his words, she held out her hand. ‘Do we shake on it, then?’

His fingers came across her own, warm and strong, the connection even here in a public library and under the strictest terms of trade still having the capacity to make her...breathless.

‘I shall keep a careful tally of all expenses, Lord Hawkhurst.’

His pupils darkened with shards of gold splintering on the edge. Predatory and watchful, yet Aurelia could not care.

He did not break his grip and she did not loosen hers, either. Rather, here in the quiet corner of a room of knowledge she wished she was standing instead on the top of Taylor’s Gap with no one around for miles and all the reason in the world to thank him properly.

He had shown her what a kiss could feel like, once, and she wanted that again. Her face flushed with the effort of holding back and for the first time she saw a hint of uncertainty cross his brow as he brought her hand upwards and placed his lips upon her skin in the smallest of caresses. His tongue against the juncture of her fingers was soft and real, saying much in the hidden quiet of honesty.

‘I don’t know what burns between us, Mrs St Harlow, but there will come a time when we shall not have the will to stop it, I can promise you that.’

There, the words were said, falling against lies and covering them with a softer edge, like snow across the jagged sharp of rocks.

Only truth. The lump in her throat made her swallow as she tried to find an answer, but what indeed could she say? If she agreed, then only ruin would follow, and if she didn’t...

She could not speak, even with everything held in a balance, and he let her hand go and took a pace backwards.

The heavy fall of feet made them turn as a woman rounded the corner a good twenty feet away and proceeded towards them and Aurelia gained the distinct impression that he had heard her coming well before the lady came into sight.

‘Lord Hawkhurst, what a delight to see you here.’ Her smile was bright until her glance passed over Aurelia’s face, and the sheen of it flattened.

‘Lady Allum.’ Hawkhurst’s detachment was back, easily in place, and Aurelia had to marvel at the way he changed so quickly from one thing to another. She feared her own expression was nowhere near as schooled. ‘Might I introduce Mrs St Harlow to you?’

Caught, the woman finally made eye contact, a furtive quick glance telling Aurelia that she believed all that had been said about her. Today the criticism hurt in a way it seldom had before.

‘Lady Berkeley said that she was hoping to have you over for dinner on Saturday, Lord Hawkhurst. It is a small and select gathering, from all that I hear. Her daughter Elizabeth was particularly looking forward to the event.’

‘I have already sent word that I cannot be present, my lady, as I shall be away from London all week.’

As the woman spoke again of another assembly she wanted Hawkhurst to attend Aurelia used the conversation to simply excuse herself And walk away, the sound of her shoes on the polished parquet flooring marking her retreat. And then she was outside, the façade of the library tall against a dark and rain-washed sky. Hailing a passing hansom cab, she tried to decide exactly what she should do about the enigmatic and menacing Lord Stephen Hawkhurst, the beat of her heart quickening as she remembered his last words to her.

*I don’t know what burns between us, Mrs St Harlow...*

So he felt it, too, this breathless intensity taking all that was ordinary and commonplace away and replacing it with... what? She stopped, searching for the right word, but it would not come in the way she wanted it and so her mind moved on.

He was due to marry one of the most beautiful debutantes of the Season and she was an outcast, for ever shut away from proper society. Nay, there could be nothing at all between them and to dream otherwise would only lead to the disappointment she had already experienced too much of.

Stephen stalked into White's club in St James's Street, barely noticing the surroundings of plush leather chairs and numerous chandeliers. All he wanted was a drink to wipe out the desire that coursed through him and the irritation of Catherine Allum's untimely interruption.

Pure lust had made him admit that which should have been unspoken, but he wished he had kept his mouth shut even whilst imagining Aurelia's flame-red hair lying across his loins, the heavy abundance of her breasts in his palms and his mouth.

Swearing roundly, he took a seat by the fire, draping his legs with his frock coat so that others might not see the swelling he could feel pushing against superfine.

'A difficult day?'

He had not thought the seat opposite to be occupied, as it was turned at an angle away from the fire, but with a scrape of wood on parquet flooring Lucas Clairmont swivelled his chair, brandy being warmed by carefully cupped hands.

'You have the look of a man who has sparred with the opposite sex, Hawk, and lost. My bets are the lady in question is the enigmatic Mrs St Harlow for I doubt the timid Lady Elizabeth Berkeley could raise such a high temper in anyone.'

Despite his dilemma Stephen smiled and accepted a glass of the same drop from a passing waiter, draining the contents before trusting himself enough to speak. 'I met Mrs St Harlow unexpectedly at Hookham's library and I offered to bring her youngest sisters out with the help of Cassandra Lindsay. They are twins.'

'A very generous offer.'

'And one she wanted to refuse.'

Laughter made Stephen wish that he had said nothing at all. 'Only a good woman can get under your skin in that way, Hawk. My wife, Lillian, has the same capacity to make me wild with both fury and desire and all at the same time.'

'I never said that was how I felt.'

'Not in words, maybe, but there is something about your demeanour since the ball that is different...'

'It is provocation and exasperation, Lucas, and it all comes down to the impossible Mrs St Harlow.'

Luc finished his drink in one unbroken swallow. 'Nay, it is the unexpected comprehension of feelings only few inspire, Hawk. If you listened to what's left of your heart, you might just hear the music, and if you do it will probably save you.'

'Lillian has turned you into a romantic, Luc, and your advice is completely without sense.'

But the strong liquor soured at the back of Stephen's throat. For the first time in his life he did not know exactly what to do with a woman and it worried him. All of Luc's talk of salvation rankled, too. Only innocence and purity might beat back the demons that consumed him and Aurelia St Harlow was no fresh-faced ingénue. His ruminations were interrupted, however, by Luc's further rhetoric.

'I ran into Lady Berkeley an hour or so back. Her daughter is most distressed that she may have offended you in some way at your ball. She has not heard from you since, it seems?'

'I have been busy.'

Leaning forwards Lucas lowered his voice. 'There is something else that I think you ought to know about your cousin's mysterious widow, Hawk. She visits St Bartholomew's Hospital once a month to speak with a doctor named Giles Touillon.'

'French?'

'Indeed.'

The world spun inwards. Lord, Shavvon had sent him to the warehouses in the Limestone Hole to find a French connection and a disenfranchised traitor. Could Aurelia St Harlow be the leak? After a lifetime of spying Stephen had ceased to believe in the benevolent nature of mere coincidence. It was always so much more than that.

'You look...odd, Hawk. Are you well?'

'Very.' Stretching back in the chair, he smiled. Even before Lucas he erected barriers. The thought made him sadder than it ought to. 'If you see Lady Berkeley in the next day or two, Luc, could you tell her I shall call upon them at the end of the week for I have been summoned away north.'

'Problems at Atherton?'

'Life is always demanding its pound of flesh,' he returned, feeling in the answer that he had not quite lied.

A few hours later Hawk walked through the maze of alleyways between Katherine Street and Drury Lane, the stench of this poorer part of London rising in his nostrils. A woman's fan brushed his face and he warned her away, the age-old code of the streetwalker's offer lost in a smile where both gums and teeth had been eaten up by the mercury cure.

He was glad he had come in the guise of a sailor, the homespun of his clothes attracting little attention as he pulled the hat he wore further down upon his forehead.

Knocking on the door of a house on the corner of one of the small intertwining streets, he waited. Within a few seconds the bolts were slipped and he was allowed through, heavy locks refastened behind him.

'Phillips said ye'd come.' The man before him was small and wiry, a shock of red hair topping a freckled face.

'He's left the papers, then.' Stephen's words were tinged with the accent of the same slums.

'I need the words first. The ones you'd know to say.'

*'Angliae notitia.'*

A lamp flared and the corners of the modest room were bathed in light. A woman sat to one side on a small stool with a baby asleep on her lap.

'Not a peep, mind, to anyone. If you talk, me wife and I, we're as good as gone.'

'I understand.' Hawk brought the coins from his pocket, the profile of the Queen etched in bronze. 'There's more where this came from if you have anything else.' A flash of greed told him that the red-haired man probably did. Settling back, he crossed his legs in front of him. Experience had taught him patience in any negotiation and the art of biding his time. Information gathering had its own set of intricate rules, after all, and the first of them was to feign indifference.

'The one they call Delsarte and his cronies have been hanging around the warehouse. I ain't seen the woman do nothing with them, though. She just goes late back to that fancy home of hers up in Mayfair when she has finished and returns in the morning. As early as sin, I should say.'

'Have you ever seen her talking with them?'

'No.'

Stephen's glance went to the girl sitting to one side, but her eyes were cast downwards.

'There is something that I heard Delsarte say...' Stopping, he waited for a timely reminder and Hawk handed him another handful of coins. 'He said that he was going to Paris and that there was more money in it than this business could provide him with. Then the rain came down heavy so's that I couldn't listen no more. The woman he was talking to was from Mother Spence's place down Katherine Lane. A big dark-haired girl with patches, rouge and a long scar down her forearm. She might know more if ye asked her, though ye'd have to be careful as she was hanging on to him like he was a gift or something.'

'Did you get into the warehouse to look over the files?'

'No, not a chance to. The dog stops you when there's no one in. A big monster of a hound that lets everyone know he's there. I heard them mention a boat, though, last week, when I was following them home from the Black Boar. The *Meridian*. I checked and she's in at St Katherine's Dock.'

'You've done well.' Standing, Stephen placed a silver shilling on the table before him. 'For the babe,' he said as he collected his hat and left.

Nathaniel Lindsay was waiting for him in his library when he returned after eleven o'clock, and he had already finished a large amount of his best bottle of whisky.

'You are still at the game, then?' His eyes passed over the homespun as Stephen took off the woollen overcoat and hat.

'If you come uninvited, you have to take what is here without comment, Nat.' Finding a glass, Hawk poured himself a generous drink, pausing to enjoy the smooth taste of the golden liquid.

'Cassie sent me.'

'Why?'

'She thinks you need a talking to over your choice of women.'

'I thought your wife approved of Elizabeth Berkeley?'

Laughter echoed around the room. 'You would devour everything about that poor chit within a year, Stephen, and curse yourself for doing so.'

'Indeed?'

'Women are like this whisky, my friend. Find a full-bodied and complicated brew and it will suit you for ever. It worked for both Luc and me.'

The words fell into the silent warmth of the library, soft harbingers of persuasion. 'You are saying that the basis for a good marriage is a complicated woman?'

Nathaniel's hands flailed in the air. 'I am saying that I am worried about you, Stephen. All this...disguise and deception. It is making you sadder than you need to be.' He paused for a second before carrying on. 'Remember when your parents died and we were at school? How old were we then? You and Luc and I?'

'Thirteen.'

'Thirteen. And we said that we would always be family from then on. We made a promise cut into the skin at our wrists.' Pulling up the sleeve on his arm, he traced one finger over a thin white line. 'I pressed too hard and ended up in the clinic and you slept on the floor beside me for a week. I think if you had not been there holding my hand in the cold of the night I wouldn't have survived. Now it is my turn to make certain that you survive.'

With a frown Stephen looked down at his own hands, the nails filled with dirt from where he had scraped them along the earth on the driveway before his foray into the dark alleys off St Katherine's Row. Placing his drink down, he stood, walking to the window to look out into the darkness.

'I have already told Shavvon I am leaving.'

'When?'

'After this...case.'

'Your brother would be pleased were he still here.'

'Considering he died for the same cause that I am quitting, I highly doubt it.' The ferocity of the words surprised Hawk.

'Which is the sole reason that you have stayed in for so long. Daniel was killed because he didn't listen to reason just as you are not doing now.'

'No. He died because I didn't protect him.'

'You took a bullet in the thigh and spent a good portion of that summer in a coma and have limped ever since, for God's sake. Your brother died because neither he nor you could outrun bullets fired by a crazy Frenchman with little in the way of integrity. You did your best to save him, Hawk, and you have paid the price in pain ever since. It's time to let it go, let it all go and find the life Daniel was never able to live. It would not be a betrayal.'

*Betrayal?*

Life in the British Service had in effect once saved him, giving purpose and family to two young boys left without either. With their parents gone, Daniel and he had been rudderless until the steady sure hand of responsibility and duty had guided them on to a path which was significant and worthy. Such initial fealty now caused Hawk's conscience to burn, yet beneath, another need blazed brighter.

Aye, betrayal came in many forms.

That thought made Stephen look up. If he didn't change, he would die. Soon. Like his brother, disappearing into the hazy and shadowed world of espionage.

Today in the company of Aurelia St Harlow he had been honest, a chance taken without thought of recompense or reprisals. He had told her exactly what he thought lay between them and he had seen the answering flicker in her eyes—an unconstrained candour budding like green leaves from a bare and frozen branch in the first days of spring. New life. New hope in the peace of truth.

Outside, a shooting star fell from the heavens and for the first time since Stephen was a child he took a moment to wish upon it.

When he called upon Nat and Cassie two days later Aurelia St Harlow and her sister Leonora Beauchamp were ensconced in the small blue downstairs salon with Cassandra and her oldest sister, Maureen. Lady Delamont, the St Auburns' London neighbour, was also in attendance, a surprising fact given that Aurelia's reputation was hardly salubrious.

'Stephen.' Cassie crossed the room and drew him in before he could escape. 'Nathaniel said you might drop by and he instructed me to keep you here until he returned. Something about "a full and bodied brew", he said, though goodness only knows what that might mean. You know Lady Delamont, of course, and you remember Mrs St Harlow and her sister Leonora Beauchamp from your ball the other evening. Maureen is up for a week to stay with me, too.'

'Good afternoon, ladies.'

Leonora smiled at him and moved over, giving Stephen no choice but to find a seat in the middle of the sisters. Aurelia did not look at him.

'I'm glad you have returned early from your journey north, Hawk,' Cassie said, with the vestige of a question.

Lady Delamont laughed and joined in the conversation. 'Lady Berkeley will be pleased, Hawk. The youngest Berkeley daughter is hoping to snare a husband before too long, I hear, and your name is amongst the mooted candidates for a dinner she has planned. A nice gal, Elizabeth, with good manners and a pleasing conversation. She will make someone a loyal and malleable wife.'

Somehow the words did not sound like praise and, chancing a quick look at Aurelia, Stephen saw how her hands had tightened on the velvet reticule in her lap.

'Oh, Hawk's name is on all the lists, Deborah.' Cassandra swatted away the gossip easily and began to speak instead of the gowns she had particularly noticed at his ball. In the ensuing chatter Stephen was able to turn and speak privately to Aurelia for the first time. Today her hair had been tightly plaited so that the redness looked darker. A small pin embellished with a ceramic flower sat above her ear.

'For a woman on society's blacklist, you seem to be garnering a good number of invitations.'

Deliberation laced a small anger. 'As soon as my sisters are paired off I am certain I shan't get another one, my lord.'

'If you throw off the black shroud you might be surprised, Mrs St Harlow. The swatch of scarlet I saw you holding the other day, for example, would suit you admirably.'

The look on her face was dubious. 'Red against red, my lord?'

'Too tempting?' Stephen enjoyed the glint of confusion in her unusual eyes and, stretching out, he allowed his thigh to touch hers. She moved back as though she had been burned, leaving as much space between them as was possible, her left side plastered tightly against the armrest.

Her reaction was ridiculous. She knew that it was, but it was as though her body almost sizzled when he touched her. Please God that he might not have perceived her response, that he might not have noticed.

‘Your father is looking well, Mrs St Harlow.’ Lady Delamont leant across and spoke loudly. ‘I always thought it a great pity when your mother left him. Sylvienne was very like you to look at, my dear, with her red hair and that quiet air of caution. I hear she lives in Paris now?’

‘She does.’

‘Surrounded by luxury and various beaux, no doubt? She had every eligible suitor in London after her in the Season, an original with a brain to match. Do give her my regards next time you see her.’

‘I shall indeed, my lady.’

Aurelia’s smile felt as artificial as her words. The last time she had visited Mama, Sylvienne had clung to her like a child needing comfort, the high price of her numerous lovers scrawled in heavy payment across her face. Abandoned by society. When she had asked after Papa the undercurrents of regret could be clearly heard in her question.

Perhaps she and her mother were more alike than she thought. Her mama had chosen to leave the right man and she had chosen to stay with the wrong one.

*Unlucky in love.*

The tiny phrase clung in her mind and Aurelia took in breath. She could not afford to let her guard down and Stephen Hawkhurst wasn’t a man to be played with. He was dangerous and powerful and menacing. Even here, sitting still amongst a group of women she was aware of a thrumming authority, a man who had fought in wars and lived.

Aye, survival had a certain note of guilt that isolated one and made mockery of small concerns. It also brought a sadness that was palpable and haunting, the vestige of dark things that were never spoken of again.

Leonora’s laughter dragged her from her thoughts.

‘I should love to come, Lady Delamont, and I am certain my sister would, too.’ Aurelia’s heart sank. ‘A masked ball, Lia. What could be more exciting?’

‘The more, the merrier, Mrs St Harlow,’ the old lady continued, ‘and I have a roomful of masks collected over the years. If you should like to choose one with your sister I would be very pleased, for my late husband was a man who had a bent towards the absurd.’

‘I have already chosen Nat’s mask, Hawk.’

Aurelia heard the humour in Cassandra Lindsay’s voice even as Hawk shifted in his seat. He did not look like a man who would enjoy a masked ball at all.

‘Your husband used to favour these sorts of occasions, Mrs St Harlow.’ Cassandra’s sister spoke for the first time, her smile so sweet Aurelia knew she could not have meant insult.

‘Indeed, it seems that Charles enjoyed anything that was underpinned with joviality.’ At least Hawkhurst did not make the words sound like a compliment, which gave Aurelia a certain satisfaction.

*Joviality.* Her world spun for a moment as she was thrust back into her past, clinging to the hope that the man she had married might disappear into the air like a wisp of smoke.

Foolish, foolish choice.

The wedding band on her finger seemed to tighten of its own accord, like a noose, an uncompromising punishment that would always be with her.

She wished she was home, in her bedroom and away from the prying eyes of others, the talk of masked balls and happy times so very far away from all that she had known.

And endured.

‘I hope none of your other sisters have caught your father’s illness?’ Cassandra Lindsay commented and Aurelia shook her head. To say more under the circumstances would be more than deceitful given Hawk’s knowledge of the whole conundrum. Even Leonora looked a little abashed

and there was an awkward silence that was filled as Lady Delamont sought advice about a certain plant for her garden which she had been unable to find.

The conversation gave Aurelia a little time to regather her wits and squash down a rising panic. The tension emanating from Lord Hawkhurst next to her was almost palpable and she was pleased when Cassandra's husband appeared at the door.

Hawkhurst stood immediately, giving Aurelia the impression that his desire to be gone was almost as great as her own, and when he gave his farewells he did not look in her direction once.

With Stephen Hawkhurst departed, however, that particular sense of excitement disappeared with him and, looking at the clock in the corner of the room, Aurelia wondered just how many minutes would need to pass before she could leave, as well.

## *Chapter Nine*

Aurelia took a letter to the hospital the next morning, the missive concealed in her reticule under other papers and a wide silk scarf. 'The last time,' she said to herself. This would be the last time she took such chances.

As she walked along the hospital corridor she was aware of a man observing her closely. When she smiled at him he fidgeted with something in his pocket and stood, disappearing around the corner at speed.

The sight of Freddy Delsarte as she came outside made her stiffen and she wondered what discovery might engender. Treason carried the death penalty and she knew that a defence of blackmail would not save her. She needed to get Sylvienne away from Paris and pay off Delsarte for his silence. Now Leonora's reputation was at stake, as well, and with the chance of happiness with Rodney Northrup almost coming to fruition...She stopped. Hawkhurst was circling in the Limestone Hole and in the places that society gathered; his connections with the secret service threaded into the verbal warnings he gave her, but for now it was Delsarte who wanted a word.

'You are the talk of the town, Mrs St Harlow, for Hawkhurst's ball has elevated you to the status of acceptable.'

'I have paid my dues, sir, as far as any legal requirements are concerned. Now I just wish to be left in peace.'

'Sylvienne might say the same.'

'Sylvienne?' Her voice was harsh even to her own ears. 'If you hurt even one hair on her head, Delsarte, I shall see to it that the truth about your questionable morality and allegiance is made known and you will be crucified for it.'

'A case of the pot calling the kettle black, Mrs St Harlow.'

She shook her head. 'Mama was a fool to have allowed you into her bed and I am even more of one to have been persuaded to deliver your letters. Lord Stephen Hawkhurst has been asking after your movements and it would be very easy to tell him all that I know.'

'Do that and you will be up there in the hanging noose alongside me, my dear. The British Government would have little sympathy for the daughter of a French whore.'

His anger made Aurelia take a step backwards. She was caught in the game as certainly as Delsarte was, her mother's welfare taking precedence over any allegiance to King or to country. Unsavoury, she knew, but Sylvienne was walking a knife edge and Aurelia could not let her fall.

The same man she had seen at the hospital suddenly crossed the street in front of them and Delsarte hurried away. Another player in the game of espionage and secrets? A further threat to the safety of her mother?

A note came in the late afternoon to Park Street as she was trying to fit in a few hours' work. The man who brought it had been instructed to wait for an answer and when she read the contents she was very glad Henry Kerslake was out and about.

Lord Hawkhurst wanted to see her and had asked her to come in the provided carriage to his town house within the hour. Worrying about the implications of such a summons, Aurelia wiped the sweat from her palms on the skirt of her gown and looked up at the waiting servant.

Should she take a risk and go? She had heard rumours that Stephen Hawkhurst worked for the British Service though nothing had ever been confirmed. Perhaps he had come snooping because of the money she sent to France. Or perhaps he had something to tell her about the entailment of Braeburn House? The cold fear of discovery was choking and she knew it would be better to face him in private and alone than in some crowded *soirée*.

'I will need ten minutes before I could accompany you.' Aurelia was glad her voice sounded steady.

‘Very well, ma’am.’

When he left she stood, the ridge of fur on Caesar’s back raised in warning, his growls subsiding at his departure. ‘I wish you could come...’ she whispered and threw him a bone from a box beneath her desk. As the hound set down to the task of gnawing on it Aurelia crossed to the mirror in the small back room.

In the silvered reflection she looked both tired and shocked, her eyes uncannily like those of her mother’s. Pinching her cheeks to try to produce some colour, she reached in habit for the pendant at her throat and stopped. No, it had gone, too, in the pretence and the deceit. There was nothing left to protect her family with but her wiles and her willpower.

Her coat hung on a hook by the door and as she pulled each button through she counted. Eight buttons. One for every year since she had met Charles St Harlow at the Redmonds’ ball in Clarence Street. Eight years since she had been truly happy. Eight years since she had slept all through a night and woken in the morning with dreams that had made her smile.

The peal of the bells from the nearby church were loud as she came into the wind and with her head held high she allowed Hawkhurst’s man to help her into the conveyance.

He should not see Aurelia St Harlow alone and so late in the day, but he wanted to look into her eyes as he asked her his questions, and know the truth. She had been seen today in the company of both the French doctor and Freddy Delsarte. He knew that if Shavvon were cognisant of such associations she would have already been brought in for questioning, such was the power of the Government’s uneasiness over foreign collaborators.

His own desires and needs were another factor entirely, though he had never been a man to put himself first. But he was disconcerted by the blood in him that raced with possibility when everything about such a reaction was wrong.

He heard the carriage and stood, cursing a rising need.

‘Mrs St Harlow, my lord,’ Wilson introduced her and left, shutting the door behind himself firmly. Hawkhurst had already given orders that he was not to be disturbed under any circumstances and their relationship was such that he knew his instructions would be obeyed to the letter.

The heat from a well-stoked fire fell across the room and he watched as she unbuttoned her coat, her fingers shaking with the effort. After the heavy outer shell was discarded she carefully laid it upon the sofa beside her. In the silken lining he caught the same rows of stitched repair that seemed evident in all of her apparel.

‘Thank you for coming.’

Her countenance was pale and drawn. When he indicated a chair to one side of the room she moved towards it, but did not sit. Her hands were gloveless and she wore no hat. ‘Would you like a drink?’

‘I seldom partake of any alcohol, my lord,’ she returned, the formal edge on her words unnerving and her voice low.

‘Wise,’ he echoed as he emptied his own glass for the third time in as many minutes. ‘You will excuse me for displaying no such abstinence.’

The slight nod of her head made him turn, her nose tip-tilted against the fire’s flame and her dimples deep even when she did not smile. No wonder her cousin had offered her marriage in so short a time. Alfred had made it known that there had been many others vying for Aurelia Beauchamp’s hand in her first Season and society had been as shocked as her father when she had chosen the self-indulgent Charles.

His cousin had whisked her from London the day of the wedding and she had not returned until her court appearance three years later, a devoted wife wrapped in widow’s weeds and a hefty dose of sorrow.

For just a moment Stephen hardly knew where to begin. 'I could order tea if you would rather?' The quick shake of her head stopped him, so instead he tried another tack. 'How long have you worked in the Park Street warehouse?'

The spark in her eyes told him she had been expecting just such a question. 'Nearly four years. The mills at Macclesfield had lain vacant for a long time and I made use of them again. The warehouse here is the London base for the business.'

'And some of your silks come in from France?'

'Yes. With the lifting of import duties it is often cheaper to bring the hand-loomed silks in as an adjunct to what we can weave.'

'So you have contact with the traders in Paris?'

She hesitated before nodding. 'I do. Is there some problem with that, my lord?'

'No problem at all. Curiosity is just one of my many faults.'

'Somehow I doubt that. Palmerston has the thought that all citizens with some link to France must be traitors.'

'You make it a point to understand politics?'

'I try to. The tariffs for the silk trade here are hefty, yet France enjoys little government intervention. Without a good knowledge of the changing pattern of the new bills and laws, my margins would suffer.'

Despite himself he laughed. 'My cousin could barely string a thought together about anything other than himself or fashion. How did he ever end up with a woman like you?'

A flash of panic crossed her face. 'I realise it is a difficult thing to understand, but I am trying to build a life again, my lord, trying to fashion a better existence for my family.'

'Why did you meet with Delsarte today, Aurelia?'

Anger whipped up fire in her eyes. 'You have had me followed?'

'England's safety comes with good intelligence.'

'Your man has poor skills, then. I spotted him both at the hospital and in the street.'

'Perhaps he wished to be seen.'

'Because you would warn me...?' Her question wavered into silence. The material in her ugly gown caught the lamplight and one of the ties at her throat was loosened so that the bodice hung away from her skin.

Dipping into his pocket, he brought forth the pendant he had located in a pawnshop two days ago. The look of surprise on her face had him reaching for her gloveless hand. Her skin felt hot and smooth as he placed the bauble within her palm and closed her fingers around it.

'It looked like a family heirloom. I thought perhaps you had lost it?'

A shake of her head brought him the truth. 'I sold it to pay the Davies stables for the rent of their carriage on a Monday. It was my grandmother's.'

Her teeth worried her bottom lip and for just a moment Hawk thought she might begin to cry. But Aurelia St Harlow was thankfully made of sterner stuff.

'You think me a traitor and yet you paid for the restoration of my pendant?'

'I am old enough to realise the world does not deal in only black and white and that grey is a colour subject to much interpretation. I would like to hear how it is you know Delsarte?'

'He was a friend of my husband's. He came religiously to the parties at Medlands. He is also an opium addict.'

Shocking. He could see it in her face, the crawl of truth and the caution of betrayal.

'Were you at these parties?'

'Once. The first night. Before I understood exactly...'

She did not go on, the silence about them pulsing with intent.

Finally she spoke again. 'It is my opinion that you came to the warehouse in Park Street because you believe there is some illicit business being carried on from those premises. I do not know who

sent you there, but it may be prudent on my behalf to suggest we make a deal, my lord. If you could find it in yourself to acknowledge that there is no nefarious activity in my small silk business, I could offer in payment the promise of a letter that would bring to light the truth of your cousin's death.'

'God, Aurelia.'

There was something in what she said that did not make any sense, though he couldn't at this moment fathom quite what it was. Her pulse was hammering in her throat, but she did not give an inch, her gaze full upon him. 'As Charles's cousin I do think you have the right to know the circumstances of his demise and the grey you spoke of a moment ago can be evident even in murder.' Her voice shook and he saw her swallow, her tongue wetting dry lips. Desperately trying to regain given ground, he suspected, and failing.

An ache he had never felt before wound into his chest and shock left him rigid. Was she admitting to both treason and murder? An unexpected tenderness welled within him, enveloping the will to move away.

How did she do this to him so very easily, make him want to protect her and keep her safe? From everyone, even given such damning revelations?

She had as many problems as he did and that was saying something. The very thought made him sad, the isolation of her at complete odds with the words that she uttered. There was no rationality in it, of course, no earthly reason that the attraction between them should shimmer and scorch above Queen and country and justice. But it did, and so brightly that desperation crawled up his arm in shock.

He wanted her. She could feel the need between them. He wanted her exactly as she wanted him, like an anchor, like a touchstone, like the only person in the whole world who might understand that in tragedy there was sometimes also a glimmer of hope.

For the first time in her life she wondered what might happen were she to put herself first and simply enjoy, but with so many people to protect and so little time to do it she needed to make him understand exactly what she was saying.

'I need immunity from any prosecution, my lord, and you intimated at Hookham's library that you were attracted to me. Perhaps in that we might both find a solution.'

He stepped back, anger on his brow. She noticed how he pulled his jacket from the hanger by the door and shrugged into it, the long tails reaching almost to his shins. He did not want her? He had not been expecting any such admission?

An error! She had made a huge error for the green-gold in his eyes was changed into dangerous amber, any civility still evident simmering under darkness.

'Surely we are adult enough to realise that the world is often not exactly as it might seem, my lord, and that there are times when the expedience of opportunity might serve us both. I am not an inexperienced green girl, you understand, and you are a man, no doubt, who has enjoyed the company of women.' It was all she could dredge up in the awkward silence, though when he motioned for her to stop she saw that she had lost him.

'The act of loving between a woman and a man is badly done when it is linked so precisely to dishonour, Mrs St Harlow.' His hand shook more than it usually did and he jammed it into his pocket away from notice.

'These might be fine words, Lord Hawkhurst, when one has the choice of exploring different options.' Fury crept into her reply.

'And you think that you do not?'

'I know it.'

'So it is only your body that lies between survival or ruin?'

'Indeed, my sisters might say thus were they to know of your tender.'

Unexpectedly he laughed, the sound echoing about the dark spaces of the room. ‘Your sisters? Your father? It is for them that you do this? Who is it that looks out for you, then, when you have need for some succour?’ Now all humour was gone completely.

The question had her turning away because in just those few words he had understood what she had tried so hard to hide.

*No one.*

She had always been alone. Fighting, trying, hobbling into each successive day with the weight of the world on her shoulders and no hope at all of being rid of any of it. Until his promise of help had thrown her with its bright and buoyant hope; a golden troth that had changed everything and now seemed gone.

She hated how expectation made a mockery of morality and when Stephen Hawkhurst held her to the spot with a quick grab of her hand she did her best to shrug him off, short nails digging into the flesh of his wrist. She did not try to be careful or gentle. All she wanted was the cold anger of force, dragging between them, punctuating the impotence and weakness that was her life so far, never in control.

And now another humiliation, more complete than ever before because even with such a simple touch she knew that she had never wanted anyone as much as she wanted Stephen Hawkhurst. Her right hand slapped hard against his arm as she tried to get away.

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