



Louise Allen

VICAR'S DAUGHTER TO
VISCOUNT'S LADY



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Vicar's Daughter
to Viscount's Lady

Аннотация

From prim church mouse... Seduced, abandoned and pregnant, Arabella Shelley is determined her baby's father will support them. Horrified to discover his death, she is shocked at the demand of his brother, the handsome, inscrutable Viscount Hadleigh. To legitimise her unborn child, she must marry him instead! ...to being pleased by the Viscount! As Bella struggles with her unfamiliar, luxurious new lifestyle, and her scandalous desire for her stranger-husband, will she find a love that matches the passion of their marriage bed? The Transformation of the Shelley Sisters Three sisters, three escapades, three very different destinies!

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Meet Meg, Bella and Celina—three loving sisters, desperate to escape the iron rule of their fanatical rector father...

One by one they flee the vicarage—only to discover that the real world holds its own surprises for the now disgraced Shelley sisters! How will they get themselves out of the scandalous situations they find themselves in?

Can betrayed widow **Meg** learn to love again?

Will pregnant and abandoned **Bella** find the man to turn her blush of shame to the flush of pleasure?

And how will virginal courtesan-in-training **Lina** discover the meaning of true passion?

Find out in...

THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE SHELLEY SISTERS

Three sisters, three escapades, three very different destinies!

Vicar's Daughter to Viscount's Lady

Louise Allen



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LOUISE ALLEN has been immersing herself in history, real and fictional, for as long as she can remember, and finds landscapes and places evoke powerful images of the past. Louise lives in Bedfordshire, and works as a property manager, but spends as much time as possible with her husband at the cottage they are renovating on the north Norfolk coast, or travelling abroad. Venice, Burgundy and the Greek islands are favourite atmospheric destinations. Please visit Louise's website —www.louiseallenregency.co.uk—for the latest news!

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The Transformation of the Shelley Sisters

For the Romantic Novelists' Association in their 50th
Anniversary year

Prologue

12 February 1814

If James truly loves you, means to marry you—then I'll help, somehow. It was over five years since Arabella Shelley had said those words to her sister Meg and helped her to elope with her childhood sweetheart, James Halgate, the local squire's son.

It was nine months since she had hugged her weeping younger sister Celina and assured her that, if she could, she would help her run away from home too, away from the oppression and tyranny of their puritanical father who was convinced that all women were the vessels of sin and must be controlled and guarded against the slightest temptation.

Dreamy Meg and sensitive Lina had wilted miserably under this treatment, pining for laughter and music, flowers and books. And love. Oh, yes, they had all pined for love, Bella thought, grounding the watering can she had been using to fill up the pewter jugs of greenery set around the font. Flowers were permitted only grudgingly in the Reverend Shelley's Suffolk church, but ivy and sombre foliage would help remind the congregation of the graveyard that awaited them all, sinners that they were.

Bella sat down in the nearest pew, ignored the cold that soaked into her booted feet from the stone floor and wrestled with guilt once again over her failure to realise what Lina had intended.

Without any help from Bella she had run away, leaving only a scrap of a letter from a sister of their dead mother, an aunt none of them had known existed until Lina had found her hidden letter.

The vicar blacked out Lina's name in the family Bible, as he had Meg's. If her sisters wrote, then their father intercepted the letters and destroyed them. Bella clung to the hope that if either of them had died, he would not have been able to conceal his knowledge of the bad end they had come to, but sometimes it was hard to hold on to the hope that they were still well and happy.

Bella rubbed her aching back and tried to push away the memory of Lina's sobs after she had been reprimanded for speaking to the curate. *He said I was a trollop, and wicked and leading Mr Perkins astray! How are we ever supposed to find husbands and get married if we may not even speak to Papa's curate?*

Goodness knows, had to be the answer to that question. But Bella knew that her own destiny was already ordained. At the age of twenty-five her fate was to be Papa's support in his old age. He had told her that often enough, with the certainty that an elder daughter should expect nothing more than to do her duty to her parent.

A lovable parent would be one thing, a sanctimonious, aggressively puritanical vicar, which was what the Reverend Shelley was, quite another. She had cherished hopes that dull Mr Perkins the curate would find one of them attractive enough to

offer for, but after the confrontation following Lina's few words with him she did not deceive herself that he would risk alienating his vicar for the sake of either of them.

Her two younger sisters could not cope with the oppression, the carping, the sheer drabness of life at the vicarage. It was better that they had gone, for she, the sensible sister, was the one who could best cope with Papa who was becoming more suspicious and ill tempered as the years went by. Now she had no younger sisters to protect—only to worry about. It was time to accept finally that her life would be bound by the vicarage walls, and by her duty as the vicar's plain spinster daughter.

Something tickled her lip and she licked it, tasting salt. Sitting here weeping would not accomplish anything, except to put her behind with her duties, and besides, she *never* cried. What was the point?

Bella wiped her eyes and looked at the note tablets suspended from the old-fashioned chatelaine that hung from her waist. *Complain to butcher re: mutton; mend surplice; assemble sewing for Ladies' Circle; turn sheets side to middle. Church greenery*—that could be crossed off. Another tear trickled down and splashed on to the thin ivory. She dabbed it off, smudging the pencil marks, and bit down on her lower lip until she felt more under control.

Sometimes she did not think she could bear this any longer. She wanted her sisters—even a letter would do. She wanted a hug, a kiss, laughter, warmth. She wanted love.

Bella picked up the remains of the ivy fronds and then lugged the heavy watering can back to the vestry. Once upon a time she had dreamed of a lover coming for her. A knight in shining armour. A gallant nobleman who would sweep her away and cherish her.

Childishness, she told herself, buttoning her pelisse and pulling on her gloves. Fairy tales did not come true and it was not sensible to dream that they might, because waking up from the dream was always bitter disillusion. She locked the vestry and went out through the south door and down to the lych gate where she paused. Beyond it was the lane that led to the Ipswich road and freedom. The road she was never going to take.

She had forgotten her basket, Bella realised. Was it worth going back for it? She half-turned as a voice said, 'Is this Lower Leaming, ma'am?'

'No, this is Martinsdene,' she began, looking back. A stranger got up from the bench sheltered in the shadows of the roofed gate. 'Lower Leaming is that...way.' Her voice trailed off.

Blue eyes regarded her with interest and a sensuous mouth curved into a smile that was—surely not?—appreciative. The man was tall, relaxed, elegant. His riding coat was so plain it had to be expensive and a cabochon ruby ring glowed with sullen fire on his ring finger. He raised the hand that was holding gloves and whip and lifted his hat and she saw brown hair that shone, styled in a fashionable crop, the like of which had never been seen in this rural backwater.

‘Thank you, Miss—?’ he said in a voice that sent warm shivers through her chilled body.

‘Shelley,’ she managed. ‘My father is vicar here.’ Even as she said it, she cast a harried look down the lane to the vicarage as though her father’s hawk eyes could see through the hedge from the study where he was engaged in writing next Sunday’s sermon.

‘Miss Shelley. I am Rafe Calne, Viscount Hadleigh.’ And he bowed, as though she were a fine lady and this was Hyde Park. Bella managed to produce an answering bob of a curtsy. ‘I am staying with my good friend Marcus Daunt at Long Fallow Hall and I must confess to being utterly lost.’

‘Yes, well, in that case you do need the Lower Leaming road,’ Bella said, thankful to be able to articulate something sensible. *A viscount, for goodness’ sake!* ‘It is past the Royal George inn and then you should take the left fork after the duck pond. If you come through the churchyard there is a bridleway that cuts off the corner—over there, by the holly bush.’

‘Will you not walk that way and show me, Miss Shelley? I seem to have the knack of getting lost.’

‘I—’

But he had already fetched a big bay horse from where it had been tethered out in the lane. He offered her his arm and Bella took it, lost for the words to refuse.

‘You know, Miss Shelley, I have to confess to being somewhat blue devilled. Here I am, supposed to be resting—I’ve been feeling a trifle off colour lately—but I have been so bored I

have not been able to relax. Poor Marcus can't work out what to do with me. So I came out for a ride, got lost and found this charming village and you. And I feel better already.'

Was she supposed to understand that *she* was making him feel better? No, of course not, Martinsdene was picturesque, artists had been known to stop to sketch it. Bella took a deep breath to steady her fluttering heart and tried not to notice how firm his arm felt under her hand and how warm he was, between her and the wind.

Oh dear, she thought. Now when I daydream I will have a real-life aristocratic hero to visualise. The bridleway was short and the pond soon reached. 'That way, my lord.' She pointed.

'Rafe, please. You are, after all, my rescuer.' He lifted her hand and kissed her fingertips. 'May I know your first name?'

'Arabella...Bella,' she stammered.

'Bella,' he murmured. '*Belle*. Beautiful lady.'

'Oh, no,' Bella retorted, common sense coming to her rescue. 'Now you are gammoning me, my lord.'

'Rafe,' he murmured.

'Rafe...this is...'

'I do not think you look in your mirror carefully enough, *bellissima*.' Rafe Calne swung up on to the big horse with enviable ease and smiled down at her. 'Until we meet again.'

Bella had walked to the butcher's in a dream, forgot what she had come for until she consulted her tablets and then walked home feeling as though she had been hit on the head. A real

viscount, flirting with her. With *her*. Because he had been flirting—she was not so innocent that she did not recognise that.

‘Arabella!’

‘Yes, Papa?’

‘Where have you been?’ The vicar did not trouble to come to the door to ask, she had to go to the study to account for her actions over the past two hours. She did not mention the viscount. It would not be sensible, Bella told herself as she went to the kitchen to make sure that Cook was doing all she should with dinner. Not that it was easy to spoil hotpot with dumplings, boiled cabbage and stewed apple.

On Saturday she went to the church to make sure the prayer books had been gathered up after a wedding and checked the vestry to see that all was in order. Another surplice with a torn hem—doubtless discarded by the curate. She might as well take it and mend it along with her father’s, she supposed, gathering it up and putting it in her basket.

Then, instead of going straight home, she wandered up the bridle path. There were the prints of Rafe’s booted feet, big and masculine next to her small ones. Bella set her foot in one and then the next, wondering at the length of his stride. Those long legs and broad shoulders had troubled her dreams a little.

‘Bella.’ He was there, sitting on his big horse, Farmer Rudge’s ducks wandering around its hooves.

‘My lord!’ He looked at her. ‘Rafe.’

Bella glanced around as he swung down from the horse, but

no one was in sight. 'Is something worrying you, Bella?' he asked, reaching for her hand.

'I—' She should pull away, but she could not. 'My father would not permit me to speak to a strange man. I should not be here with you.'

'I am sorry for that.' He looked sombre and the blue eyes were shadowed. 'I felt the need to talk with someone and you seemed...But if you must not, then I will go away.'

'Talk? About what?' She left her hand in his.

'Here, in the country, I am beginning to see my life for what it is. Futile, empty. Pleasure, money—I am a sinner, you know, Bella,' he said earnestly, tucking her hand into the crook of his elbow and walking slowly off down the lane away from the village, the horse following.

'You are?'

'Oh, yes. And then I look at you—pure, innocent, devoting yourself to your duties—and I see myself for what I am. I wish some of that goodness would rub off on me, Bella.'

'You just need to want to be good,' she protested.

'And you are satisfied with your life?' he asked her. She could not answer, but she felt the guilty blush and saw him see it too. 'Not entirely, I think?'

And so she had told him, all about how Papa had changed slowly over the years, how Mama had died on a visit to London, how Meg and Lina had run away, and he had brushed a tear from the corner of her eye and kissed her, just a fleeting, chaste kiss

of comfort and her world had shifted on its axis.

He had come to church on Sunday, serious and attentive, head bowed. After that she had seen him every day. He was always careful, always discreet, but the long walks, when she told him about living in the country and confided how difficult Papa was, and sympathised with his stories of London life and how it was turning to dust in his mouth, were like shining jewels in the dull ashes of her existence.

And on the eighth day he had kissed her, not giving comfort, not seeking it, but with a lover's passion, and she had clung to him, consumed with his heat and power and glamour.

'I love you, Bella,' he had murmured against her hair, their breath mingling in the crisp February air. 'Be mine.'

'You must talk to Papa,' she had stammered, dizzily aware that her dream had come true. Her knight had come for her.

'I must go back to London,' Rafe said. 'And speak to my lawyers. I will have them draw up a settlement so your father can see exactly what I will do for you. And I will bring back a housekeeper to look after him until he can choose one that best suits him.'

'But should we not talk to him first? I do not like to deceive him,' she protested.

'My darling, he sounds a most difficult man and I, I will admit, am the kind of rake of whom he will have the deepest suspicions.'

'But you are reformed now,' Bella protested.

'Yes, thanks to you.' Rafe caressed her. 'But he will believe

it more when he sees the settlement, sees the ring I bring with me, knows his every interest—and yours—will be attended to. Then he might see the benefits of having the Viscount Hadleigh as his son-in-law. Would he like a better parish? I am sure I could influence something.’

‘Oh, Rafe, would you? Perhaps he feels he has failed, never getting preferment, and if he did, he would be happier and less difficult.’

‘For you, my love, I’ll bow to every bishop in the kingdom,’ he assured her. ‘And find your sisters too.’

‘Rafe.’ And she had kissed him, deeply, clumsily.

‘Lady Hadleigh.’ He smiled down, suddenly serious. ‘Will you really take me? I don’t deserve you. Perhaps you will change your mind once I have gone.’

‘No! Never. I love you.’

‘Then be mine, Bella. Show me you love me. Show me you trust me.’

‘But...before we are married?’ she queried, anxious and confused.

‘You don’t trust me, I knew it. But what could I expect?’ he said, turning away, his face stark. ‘I will leave, now. It is better. We cannot marry if you do not trust me. I thought—’

He made a gesture of hurt rejection and she clung to his arm. ‘Rafe. Of course I trust you. Of course I do.’ He swept her up, his mouth hot and urgent on hers, his arms so strong and sure, and strode towards the great tithe barn.

Chapter One

23 May 1814

It was a long carriage drive to trudge up in the drizzle, and the walk gave Bella far more time to think than she needed. *Rafe must listen to me*, she told herself fiercely. *He might ignore my letters, but he cannot refuse to help me, not face to face.* It was three months since she had lain with him in the barn on a bed of hay and felt his heart beating over hers.

Now she was apprehensive in her heart, queasy and weary in her body and bitterly angry, both with herself and with him. She had believed him. She had been so desperate to be loved, so sure of what she wanted, that when it appeared right in front of her, reached out for her, she had fallen, hook line and sinker for every lure of an experienced, conscienceless rake. And now she was with child. A fallen woman. Ruined.

No, please, she prayed as she walked. *Don't let him be without all conscience. Please let it be all right soon. Oh, Baby, forgive me. I am so ashamed. And unless he helps me, I don't know what to do, I don't know how I will look after you. But I will. Somehow.*

And she was so tired with the pregnancy, with the travelling, with the fear. Rafe had not been in London; his fine house in Mayfair had been locked up and dark with the knocker off the door, but she was here now at the big estate he had described to her, dazzling her with images of her life with him as his wife.

His viscountess. She had asked at the gate house and they said his lordship was in residence.

She pictured him as she walked. For a few blissful days he had made her glow with happiness. Rafe Calne, Viscount Hadleigh. Tall, handsome, brown haired and elegant with blue eyes that had smouldered their way into her heart and soul. Rafe Calne, her love and her seducer. She had tumbled into love and into his arms so easily, with every tenet of virtue and modesty forgotten in the whirl of emotion. She had dreamed of a fairy tale, was desperate for a fairy tale, and when she found herself in one she had believed in it implicitly. And now she was being punished for dreaming.

Ruined women like her were supposed to throw themselves into the river out of the depths of their shame. She had walked down to the Thames when she had found his London house deserted. She had looked at the swirling brown water. But she could not, would not, despair. She was the sensible sister, she reminded herself bitterly. She would come up with a plan.

And she was carrying a child and nothing, if she could help it, would hurt that baby. It did not matter what happened to her, it did not matter how much scorn he poured onto her head, the baby must be provided for.

Her feet were wet and cold. Rafe did not maintain his carriage drive in good order. Bella tugged her hood further over her face and shook the foot that had just trodden in a water-filled pothole. But he was a busy man, he had told her that. Doubtless his estate

workers had not been supervised as they might. Rafe had been busy seducing another hapless innocent or flirting with some great lady, no doubt.

Bella's valise was banging uncomfortably against her knee and it was making her fingers numb. For the day after May Day, this was miserable weather: certainly it was not the day to set out on a three-mile walk through the countryside on an empty, unsettled stomach. It was probably a judgement for travelling on a Sunday, one more sin to add to the one she had so gladly, so recklessly, committed. The drive turned around an over-grown bed of shrubs and there was the house, Hadleigh Old Hall, sprawling low and golden brown and beautiful, even in the rain. It should have been her new home.

Bella straightened her shoulders as she reached the front door and banged the knocker. *Deep breath, keep calm.* He would be surprised to see her, shocked perhaps that she had travelled alone, angry when he heard what she wanted—of that last she had no doubt.

The butler's face as he opened the door spoke more than the words he was not uttering. Bella dripped in the shelter of the high porch and wondered if her nose was red or blue. She could imagine just what a sight she must present, soaking wet and travel stained after four days on the road, and she could see it in the way the butler looked at her. Eventually the man spoke. 'Miss?' 'Good afternoon.' His eyes narrowed at the sound of her cultivated accent and his face became expressionless. Bella took

a deep breath and summoned up the tatters of her poise. She would pretend the butler was the butcher and she was having to complain about the meat again. 'I wish to see Lord Hadleigh.'

'His lordship is not at home.'

'Lord Hadleigh will wish to see me whether he is receiving or not. Kindly tell him that Miss Shelley is here.' She stepped forwards and the butler, caught off guard, stepped back. 'Thank you. I will wait in the salon, shall I?' She dumped her bag by the door.

The butler received her sodden cloak and then looked as though he might drop it, but in the face of her accent, her certainty and one lifted eyebrow, he ushered her into a reception room.

'I will inform his lordship of your arrival.'

It had been too much to hope the man would offer such an unconventional guest a cup of tea. Bella eyed the satin upholstery, decided not to sit on it in her damp skirts despite her shaking legs and tried to study the pictures on the wall.

She hardly had time to realise she could not focus on the first when the butler returned. 'His lordship will receive you in the study, Miss Shelley.'

The room tilted a little. *Rafe, at last. Please, God. Let me do this right. Let him have some shred of pity.* 'Thank you.'

The study was on the north side of the house, deep in shadows. A fire flickered in the grate; the only light, a green-shaded reading lamp, was focused down on to papers on the desk. It

illuminated the lines of Rafe's jaw, the edge of his cheekbones, the glint of his eyes as he stood, but not much more.

‘Miss Shelley.’

So formal, so calm—he is concerned that the butler might come back. His voice seemed deeper; perhaps that was surprise at seeing her. He did not sound angry. That would come and she had tasted his anger, his fury at any attempt to thwart or contradict him.

‘Rafe...My lord, I had to come.’ She stepped towards him, but his left hand lifted, gestured towards a chair, and the firelight caught the flame of the familiar cabochon ruby on his ring. That hand, sliding slowly down over her breast, over the pale curve of her belly, down...

‘Thank you, but, no.’ It left him on his feet too, a shadowy figure behind the desk, but she was too agitated to sit. ‘You will be surprised to see me.’

‘Indeed.’ Still no anger. Perhaps this cool distance was worse; he did not seem to even know her.

Bella felt a fresh pang of apprehension, a wave of hot shame that she was in this position.

‘When you...left me you made it clear you never wanted to see me again.’ *Silly little sentimental fool...Clumsy country wench—the only thing you can do on your knees is pray...So easy, so gullible and not worth the effort.* He had slapped her face when she began to weep.

Rafe shifted abruptly, then was still, remaining behind the

desk. 'And yet you are here.'

She could not read the emotion in his voice. The shadows seemed to shift and sway. It was necessary to breathe, to be silent for a moment or two while she fought the nausea and the shame. He was going to make her spell it out, he was not going to offer her the slightest help to stammer out her demands.

She felt her knees trembling, but somehow she dared not sit down. Something dreadful was happening, just as her worst fears had told her, and she needed to be on her feet to face it. He was so cold, so distant. *He is going to refuse.* 'I am with child. *Our child*, Rafe.'

'I see.' He sounded remarkably calm about it. She had expected anger, shouting. Only the flash of that ruby in the firelight showed any sign of movement.

'You promised me marriage or I would never have...never... I know what you said when we parted, but we must consider the baby now, Rafe.'

She could almost feel the emotion flowing from him in waves now, belying his calm tone. But she could not decipher it, except to feel the anger, rigidly suppressed. Perhaps it was her own fear and humiliation she could feel. Bella pulled air down into her lungs and took an unobtrusive grip on the back of the nearest chair.

'You are certain that you are with child?' That deep, dispassionate voice unnerved her as much as his words. Rafe had always been laughing, or whispering or murmuring soft, heated

endearments. Or at the end hurling cutting, sneering gibes. He had not sounded like this.

‘Of course! Rafe—’ She took a step towards him but his hand came up again and she froze. There was a silence. She could tell in the light of the reading lamp that Rafe had bowed his head as though in thought. Then he looked up. ‘And you came here thinking to marry Rafe Calne? That will not happen, child or no child.’

The room swam out of focus. Bella gripped the chair as though drowning. But she did not weep or protest. She had expected it and had planned for it and now, with the uncertainty gone, felt somehow stronger. A cold calm settled over her and from somewhere deep inside she summoned up her courage and her will; later she could weep—she had had enough practice at that when she first realised she was pregnant. But now she had to think about her baby. What was going to happen to them?

‘You are responsible for this child,’ she said, hating the way her voice shook, not wanting to show weakness. ‘You must provide for it, even if you have no care for me. It is your moral obligation.’ She would fight tooth and nail for her baby, she had realised as the days passed. Now her own emotions, her own happiness, no longer mattered. She would battle Rafe, however he wounded her, whatever foul words he hurled at her. What could he do to her that was worse than what had already happened?

‘The situation, Miss Shelley, is rather more complex than you believe, although I cannot blame you for seeing it in somewhat

black-and-white terms.’ Rafe came out from behind the desk before she could speak.

She stared as he stepped into the light from the fire, the warm glow illuminating his face, sparking sapphire from eyes bluer than she had ever seen, gilding hair the colour of dark honey. ‘You are not Rafe.’ Bella sat down with a thump on the chair as her legs gave way.

‘No,’ he agreed. ‘I am his brother Elliott. Rafe died of a poisoned appendix ten days ago. You asked for Hadleigh—I now hold the title.’

Bella found herself without words. Rafe was dead. Her child’s father was dead. The man she had sacrificed her principles and her honour for was dead. There were no tears, she realised hazily, nor satisfaction either. Only pain. Bella laid her hand over her cramping stomach protectively. She must be strong, for the baby’s sake.

The stranger’s face—Rafe’s face in so many ways—was expressionless as he began to walk around the room, setting a spill from the fire to the candles. Bella fought for some composure. She had to say something or he would think her addled as well as wanton. She had given her virtue to his brother and now she was carrying his illegitimate child. This man would despise her. All right-thinking people would despise her, she knew that. Love was never an excuse, not for the woman.

‘My sympathies on your loss,’ she managed when he came and sat down opposite her, crossed long legs and settled back with

the same casual elegance that Rafe had possessed. *Rafe is dead*, her churning thoughts clamoured. Rafe, the man she had thought she loved, was dead. He had betrayed her and Bella supposed another woman might rejoice that he was no more, but she could not. She just felt blank.

‘Thank you,’ Lord Hadleigh said and his face showed some emotion at last, a tightening, as if a migraine had stabbed at his nerves. ‘We were not close, I regret to say. You were in love with my brother?’

That was abrupt enough. He certainly did not beat about the bush, this brother-ghost of her lover. ‘Yes, of course I was.’ His mouth twisted and this time it was clearly the hint of a smile. ‘You think me immoral, wanton, I am sure,’ Bella protested, goaded by his amusement. ‘But I loved him. I thought he loved me. It was not easy; my father would not countenance me marrying, I knew that. We had to keep it secret.’

Was she making any sense? Her tongue and her brain seemed disconnected. It must be shock, she realised. How could she explain and make him understand the objections a country vicar might have to his daughter marrying a viscount?

He did not appear judgemental, just detached. ‘I see. You were certain of my brother’s affections?’

‘Of course I was.’ She blushed, surprising herself. Surely she was beyond that manifestation of maidenly modesty? ‘He was so sweet, so passionate, so convincing.’ She had to be frank, there was no point in trying to shield her privacy from this man. ‘I never

thought I would escape from Martinsdene,' she murmured. 'But I dreamed and my dream came true—a viscount fell in love with a vicar's plain daughter. Or so it seemed.'

'Are you plain?' Elliott Calne tilted his head to one side and studied her face. 'No lady would be looking her best just at this moment. I will reserve judgement.' His eyes laughed at her for a moment, and her heart turned over. Rafe's eyes, but deeper, more intent. Rafe's eyes alone could have seduced her without the need for a word spoken. These made her catch her breath and wonder at their secrets. 'I am sorry, this is no time for levity,' he said, serious again. 'You found you were mistaken in him?' He sounded regretful, but not surprised.

He must have known his brother was a rake, she realised. But he sounded as though he was fond of him anyway. The poor man was in mourning; she could not pour out her own fury and bitterness at Rafe to him, it was bad enough as it was. He did not need to hear the details of that brutal last day.

Bella wondered if she was going to be sick. She had heard that sickness only affected pregnant women in the mornings, and would go away eventually. But she was still feeling queasy most of the time. And tired and thirsty. And desperate to escape to the privy. And her breasts were tender and her legs and back ached. And there were about six more months of this still to be endured. *I am sorry, Baby*, she thought. *It isn't your fault*. Under her hand her rebellious stomach still felt as flat as usual.

'Are you feeling unwell? I should have thought to order

refreshments, but your news was somewhat of a shock. Tea, perhaps. Plain biscuits? I understand from my cousin Georgy that they are a great help for nausea.'

That was perceptive of him. And kind. Was he truly kind or was he simply wary of a pregnant and distressed woman being ill in his study? Bella opened her eyes and studied the lean face watching her. He was not smiling now and he looked tired and rather grim. As well as losing his brother he had inherited a mountain of responsibility and now she had turned up, with this news.

'Thank you. That would be very welcome.' How calming civil politeness was—on the surface. Underneath she wanted to sob and shout. Rafe was dead, her baby was fatherless, she could not go home. Would this man help her or were tea and biscuits the extent of his kindness? 'Is there...are you married? If Lady Hadleigh—'

'No. I am not married.' The hope of some sympathetic female support vanished. Her question—or was it the concept of marriage itself?—seemed to amuse him. Perhaps he was another rake like his brother. But he could hardly damage her more than Rafe had already.

Elliott Calne tugged the bell pull and waited. Silence and stillness seemed to come naturally to him. Was he used to being solitary, or was his mind working frantically on the problem of how to deal with her with the least possible expense, fuss and scandal?

Then the butler came in and he smiled and she saw that, whatever else he was, he was not a man given to brooding bad humour. There were laughter lines at the corner of his eyes and that smile was more than a polite token for a servant.

‘Henlow, please take Miss Shelley to Mrs Knight. She requires a bedchamber to refresh herself and rest. Have a tea tray with biscuits sent up. I will see you for dinner at seven, Miss Shelley; we keep country hours here just now.’

‘Thank you. But, Lord Hadleigh, I cannot stay here, it is not at all—’

‘The thing? No, indeed you cannot.’ That smile again, as though she was still a lady, not a fallen woman, not his brother’s discarded...No, she could not use the any of the words Rafe had hurled at her like sharp stones. ‘We will discuss it over dinner.’

Elliott sat beside the fire in the small dining room, a book in his hands that he had not tried to read. He had felt the need to leave the study after that encounter—the atmosphere of distress and desperation could be cut with a knife. *God, Rafe. What have you done now?* For years, for all his adolescence, for all his adult life, he had been hoping that his elder brother would reform his ways, become the man Elliott was certain he must be, somewhere deep inside.

He wanted to love his brother as he had when he had been a child, but he had never been able to reach past the shield of disdain Rafe had erected against affection and contact. He knew there had been extravagance, dissipation, women. He had

worried about Rafe's health and had tried to speak to him when they ran across each other in Town, but Rafe had always curled a lip and ignored him.

'You and your Corinthian set,' he had sneered. 'Sport and clean-limbed good fellowship while you batter each other's brains out in the boxing salon or waste good gaming time racing your damn horses. And when you aren't being smug about your muscles or your horses you are taking your bloody estate and its turnips so seriously that I think you must be a bastard of Farmer George's. Never thought our mother had had the King sniffing round her petticoats, but—'

Elliott had hit him, flush on the chin, and knocked him down. After that, they barely acknowledged each other. Occasionally one of his friends would have an embarrassed word when Rafe had offended yet another elderly lord, or ruined some young sprig at the card tables only to lose the same fortune the next day, but all of them knew that Elliott could not influence his brother.

Sometimes he felt like the elder and that oppressed him. He wanted to enjoy himself, to live life to the full, not to have to worry about anything out of his own control, and yet he found himself dragged back again and again to the waste and the anger.

And then there were the women. Rafe had kept a string of expensive ladybirds and actresses. Elliott doubted he had treated any of them well once the novelty wore off, but at least they had been professionals. But innocent young gentlewomen? Surely this had to be the first? Please God, Miss Shelley was the only

one.

And not content with seducing and ruining her, Rafe had managed to impregnate her, the thoughtless, careless devil. He should have married her. Elliott stared at the flames. She might have been the making of his brother, the saving of him. He didn't want this damn title, he wanted his own life and his brother back, well and happy and settled, with the evil demon that had clawed its way into his soul cast out.

Chapter Two

‘My lord.’ The room was small and intimate, a cosy supper room, not the grand dining chamber she had been expecting. Lord Hadleigh rose to his feet from a chair beside the fire and put down the book that had been closed in his hands.

‘Good evening, Miss Shelley.’ That smile again. Despite everything there was a lightness there, a sense that he smiled easily. He watched her and she had the impression that he was looking at her as a woman and that, under different circumstances, he might have flirted with her. Yet she did not feel threatened.

‘You are rested and feeling a little better, I trust.’ He went to take the chair at the head of the small rectangular table and a footman pulled out the other chair set at right angles to his. Bella sat and had her napkin shaken out for her.

She had been fussed over by a pleasant housekeeper who had removed her wet clothes, found her a cosy wrapper and then tucked her up in bed with a cup of tea and a dish of plain biscuits. Without in the least expecting to, she had slept deeply and dreamlessly for almost two hours.

Neither the housekeeper, nor the maid who came to wake her and help her dress, seemed at all surprised that she had turned up out of the drizzle. It was curiously hypnotic, this degree of comfort and luxury, the unobtrusive service, the lack

of questions. It would not last, but she would draw strength from it while she could. And she so much needed strength. Strength to fight her own guilt and despair, strength to fight the world's opinion.

She had woken, knowing what she must do for her baby. Rafe might be dead, but the plan she had originally formed to deal with his almost inevitable refusal to marry her must still be tried. She felt ashamed to have to demand it now, but a steely determination had entered her heart while she slept. She would do whatever it took to protect her child, even at the expense of a man who was innocent in all this.

'I feel much better, I thank you, my lord.' It was seven o'clock on a dark, wet May evening, the seducer who had rejected her was dead and she was virtually penniless amongst strangers. Bella stamped on the rising panic; she could say nothing with the footman in attendance.

'Serve the soup, Harris, and then leave us. I will ring.'

The savoury curls of steam made her almost dizzy with desire. It was an effort to sip the soup and not to pick up the dish and drain it. It must be forty-eight hours since she had eaten a proper meal, but the rags of her pride made it important to behave like a lady in this, if nothing else.

'Well, Miss Shelley.' Lord Hadleigh regarded her with those deep blue eyes and she felt insensibly a little safer. 'Will you tell me your first name?'

'Arabella, my lord.'

‘And when is the baby due?’

‘Early December.’ That was easy to calculate; she had lain with Rafe only the once, after all.

‘You believed my brother would marry you? He offered marriage? Do have one of these bread rolls, they are excellent.’

‘Yes, he promised. Perhaps you doubt my word?’ she asked, the moment of reassurance vanishing. Elliott Calne shook his head. ‘I am sure you think me wanton. I should be ashamed to even try to justify myself. But it was a fairy tale: my Prince Charming had hacked his way through the thorns to rescue me. You are doubtless wondering how a twenty-five-year-old woman could be such a romantic. It is not like me, I assure you. I have the reputation of being sensible and practical,’ she added bitterly.

‘Where did you meet? In London, I suppose.’ He was too polite to comment on her morals and she was not sure how to explain it to him in any case. How could a man understand the impact his dazzling, treacherous brother had had on her? She was the lonely, dutiful, unhappy eldest daughter of the vicarage and Rafe had been the fulfilment of a fantasy.

‘No, in Suffolk. I live—lived—in a village near Ipswich. I am a vicar’s daughter. My two younger sisters, who could not bear life with Papa any longer, ran away some time ago. I remained. I am expected to support my father in his old age.’

‘How old is he, for God’s sake?’ the viscount demanded. He was certainly to the point, she observed, through her haze of misery.

‘Fifty-three.’ Bella took a wary sip of the red wine in her glass.

‘A long wait for him to become decrepit, then. I gather he is not a joy to live with. More soup?’

‘No. No more soup, thank you, and, no, he is not.’ It was futile to lie. Lord Hadleigh needed to understand. ‘He believes that females are natural sinners, the cause of wickedness, and it must be beaten out of them if necessary. “Woman is the daughter of Eve. She is born of sin and is the vessel of sin”.’ She quoted the sampler she had worked with her sisters. ‘My middle sister eloped with a young officer, her childhood sweetheart, the youngest ran away and I was seduced by a viscount. Papa was quite correct, it seems. I do not know where either of them is,’ she added with a pang. Bella put down her spoon with an unsteady hand and braced herself for this viscount to express his disapproval.

‘So, with two sisters gone by the time Rafe happened along, you were ripe for escape?’

That was not the outright condemnation she had expected. Did Rafe’s brother understand after all? It was hard to tell whether he was sarcastic or sympathetic. How to explain the magic of the week of February sunshine that had come with Rafe, like a harbinger of joy? How to convey the sheer wonder of having such a man—handsome, attentive, sophisticated—pay her attention?

‘He had fallen in love at first sight, he said,’ she began, haltingly explaining it to both him and herself. ‘He was in the country, staying with his friend Marcus Daunt at Long Fallow Hall a few miles away. He admitted he was on a repairing

lease because he was not feeling too well. The last thing he had expected was to fall in love, he told me.'

'That must have been the infection beginning,' Lord Hadleigh said. 'I wondered where he had been. He was in London when he died.'

It seemed odd that he did not know his own brother's movements. And how strange that she had not sensed that he was ill; somehow the baby made a connection between them that should have been tangible, however much she hated him. 'When was it? Did he...was there much pain?' The room blurred as she struggled to get her emotions under control. This was her baby's father; even after everything, she did not want him to have suffered agonies.

'He was in some pain at first, they tell me, but he slipped into unconsciousness very quickly. Miss Shelley—' He got to his feet and came round the table to crouch down beside her, his movements lithe. He was fit, she thought vaguely, and fast. 'I am sorry, that was too abrupt. Here, drink some wine.' He picked up the glass and wrapped her fingers around it, guiding hand and glass to her lips.

She drank a little. 'Thank you. I am all right. I wanted to know, it is better than imagining things.' She made herself go on with her story as he went back to his seat. It was hard to look at him: he was so like Rafe and yet, so different. He seemed kind, he seemed caring. So had Rafe—at first. *Beware*, the voice of experience whispered. *He's a man*. 'We loved each other—I

thought—but I warned him about Papa, who became angry if I and my sisters so much as spoke to the curate.’

‘Viscount Hadleigh is hardly the curate,’ the current holder of the title observed drily. He got to his feet, removed her soup plate and began to carve a capon. ‘Are the side dishes within your reach?’ He handed her a plate with meat and served himself.

‘Thank you, yes.’

‘Go on, Miss Shelley. He loved you, you loved him, but your father would object because he wanted to keep you at home for his own comfort.’

‘We spoke of marriage and made plans. Rafe would go back to London, organise the settlements and return to present Papa with a *fait accompli*—he was even going to employ a good housekeeper and bring her with him so Papa would not be abandoned. It all seemed perfect, that day. I was head over heels in love and... We became lovers. He asked and I... He said I could not love him, if I refused. So I did as he asked me.’

She could not go on. She was not going to describe the horror of it all disintegrating about her. The nightmare. She had loved Rafe, she knew she would have learned to please him in bed if she had had the chance, if he had cared for her in return and had wanted to teach her. But—‘That is all,’ she concluded abruptly and looked up to find Elliott Calne’s eyes studying her with something painfully like pity in them.

Elliott was silent, twisting his wine glass between long fingers. Further intimate revelations seemed beyond Bella, but good

manners insisted she try to make some kind of conversation. She could not just sit and sob, however bad she felt. 'Forgive me,' she ventured, 'but were you and your brother close?'

'You mean, I presume, how like him am I?' That question appeared to amuse him. The smile appeared, and goose bumps ran up and down her spine. It was some form of sorcery, that smile. In combination with those eyes it should be illegal. 'Not very, except in looks. I am the boringly well-behaved younger brother, after all.'

Boring hardly seemed the word. Bella made herself focus on him, not just on his resemblance to Rafe. Nor, she guessed, was *well behaved* an accurate description. There was an edge to Elliott Calne's observations that suggested a cheerfully cynical view of the world and a lack of shock at her story that made her suspect that he was quite familiar with the pleasures of life.

'You are?'

'For a long time I was the *poor* younger brother as well. That does put a slight crimp in one's descent into debauchery, unless one has no concern about debt or one's health. I enjoy sport, I enjoy working hard, being fit. I prefer to make money, not to squander it. Then when I had it I found that working for my wealth made me value it a little more than, perhaps, Rafe did his inheritance.'

He raised his eyes fleetingly to study the room and she glanced around too. Under the opulence there were small signs of decay, of money skimped on repairs and spent on show. Bella noticed a

patch of damp on the wall by the window, a crack in the skirting, and recalled the potholes in the carriage drive. The fingers of Elliott's left hand tightened on the stem of his wine glass, the ring that had been Rafe's sparking in the candlelight. She realised that his eyes were on her and not the room. He glanced away again, went back to his silent thoughts.

Bella put down her knife and fork and studied the face that was so like, and yet unlike, his brother's. Rafe's face had been softer than this man's, though the searing attack of Rafe's anger had been sharp; she felt that Elliott's would be more ruthless and controlled under a façade that was more light-hearted than Rafe's. She shivered and he caught it at once; he was watching her more closely than she had realised.

'Are you cold?' She shook her head. 'Still hungry? Shall I ring for cheese, or a dessert?' The perfect host, yet this was very far from the perfect social situation and Bella suspected that much more was going on in that sharply barbered head than concerns over her appetite.

'No, thank you, my lord.' She was as warm and well fed and rested as she was going to be; now was the moment to say what she had resolved upstairs when she woke.

Goodness only knew how he would respond, but she was prepared to be utterly shameless. After a lifetime of doing what she was told, thinking of everyone else's welfare, needs and whims before her own, she was going to stand up and fight for her child. After all, the world would say she had put herself beyond

shame. 'My lord.'

He looked at her, alerted by the change in her tone. 'Miss Shelley?'

'You are Rafe's heir, so I must ask you to do this—insist upon it.' Her voice quavered and she bore down hard on the fear and the emotion. She had to get through this. 'I want you to provide me with a house—just a small, decent one—and enough money for me to raise my child respectably. I can pretend to be a widow, I need very little for myself. But I must ask you to pay for his education if it is a boy or for a dowry if it is a girl. I am very sorry to have to demand this of you, but I realise I must do whatever I can for my baby's safety and future.'

He studied her from under level brows and with no trace of emotion on his face. Was he shocked by her explicit demands? 'I am sure you will be a veritable tigress in defence of your cub,' he remarked at length, bringing the angry colour up into her cheeks. 'But, no, I will not set you up in some decent little house in some provincial town somewhere and provide for your child as you ask.'

Bella's fingers curled into claws. For a moment she felt just like the animal he had likened her to. 'You must—'

'I will not.' It was like walking into a wall. He did not move, he did not raise his voice, but Bella knew, with utter clarity, that this was not an unplanned reaction. He had guessed what she would ask and he had made up his mind.

He would have her driven back to the Peacock in Chipping

Campden where she had left the stage coach, no doubt. Now that he had looked after her basic welfare and she had made her demands, he would want her out of the house. Well, she would go, she had no strength left tonight to fight him.

But she would be back tomorrow whether he liked it or not—Elliott Calne was her only hope and she would do whatever she had to until he gave in. Anything. She would come back, and back, until he either called in the constable or gave her what she needed. If she had to she would threaten a scandal, although she knew who was likely to come off worst if she did. Blackmail, shaming, threats—whatever weapon she could find, she would use it.

‘I cannot argue with you now, but I will, I promise you. I should be leaving now. I will—’

‘Indeed, yes,’ he interrupted her, his tone as pleasant as if they had been discussing the weather. ‘It is getting late and you have had a long and difficult day. I am afraid that the Dower House is draughty and my great-aunt querulous—although you will not see her tonight—but my cousin Dorothy is a pleasant enough female.’

‘Your—’ The Dower House and his female relatives? Was Lord Hadleigh insane? He could not deposit the woman who had been his brother’s lover, who was carrying his brother’s illegitimate child, on those respectable ladies. ‘But I cannot stay with your relatives. I am ruined! They would be mortified if they realised.’

‘They would be mortified if my wife-to-be stayed anywhere else.’

Bella’s hand jerked and the stain spread like blood over the white tablecloth as her almost-full wine glass toppled. ‘Your wife? You intend to *marry* me? *You?*’

‘Why, yes. Have you any better suggestion, Arabella?’

‘I came here with a perfectly reasonable proposition, and you refused me without even discussing it and now you suggest marriage!’

‘It was not a suggestion. It is what is going to happen.’ Elliott cut through her half-formed thoughts. From his tone he was both making a prediction and issuing an order. He looked as though he was negotiating a business deal, his eyes cold and steady. The charming smile had gone.

‘It is ridiculous! I do not know you. Rafe is the father—’

‘Rafe is cold in the ground.’ She flinched, but he pressed on, ignoring her wordless gasp of shock at his frankness. ‘And how well did you know *him*? I thought you wanted the best for your child.’

‘I do! I would do anything for this baby...’ Her voice trailed away as she saw where this was taking her. ‘Anything.’

‘Exactly. I assume you mean that. You did not come here really expecting to marry Viscount Hadleigh, did you? If Rafe had been alive, he would have refused and you know it, so you had, most sensibly, planned your demands.

‘Now you will become a viscountess, move here, live in what

—once I get this place into some sort of order—should be reasonable comfort. The difference is that you will be marrying me and not my brother. Is that such a sacrifice to make for your child or are you telling me you would prefer to live a lie in dowdy seclusion in some remote market town, bringing up a bastard?’

The sharp vertical line between his brows and the edge to his words told her quite clearly how little he wanted this.

‘Of course I would not,’ Bella snapped, nerves getting the better of shock and distress and even the remnants of good manners. ‘If I thought for a moment you meant it—’

‘You doubt my word?’

Now she had impugned his honour and he was on his aristocratic high-horse. It would be nice to be able to complete a sentence. Bella hung on to her anger—it was more strengthening than any of the other emotions that were churning inside her. She tried again. ‘I doubt you have thought this through. I have no desire to be married to a man who is going to bitterly resent it the moment the knot is tied. You would make an appalling husband.’

Judging by the way the corner of his mouth quirked, he appeared to find her completely unfair words mildly diverting, damn him. Bella had a momentary pang of conscience over thinking such a thing, but found she was beyond caring. This was a nightmare and somehow she had to wake up.

‘Don’t laugh at me!’

‘Do you think I find this amusing? Then let me explain something, Arabella.’ Elliott got to his feet, about six foot three

of intense male at very close quarters. She did her best not to flinch away when he planted his hands on the table and leaned towards her, those deep blue eyes holding hers. ‘I am Hadleigh. I am head of this family now. But if Rafe had done what he should have done and married you before he died, then I would be sitting here, a guest in *your* house, acting as *your* trustee until the birth of that child.

‘And if it is a boy, *he* would be Viscount Hadleigh and I would be Mr Calne, his guardian, nothing more. Do you expect me, in all honour, to ignore that fact?’

Chapter Three

‘But you are the legal heir. You hold the title now. You cannot want to marry me,’ Bella protested.

‘For God’s sake, stop worrying about me or Rafe or anything else and worry about your child,’ Elliott snapped. ‘My brother should have left you alone or married you: one or the other. In fact, he should have married years ago. But he did not. Do you think I am grateful for his heedless behaviour because I now have the good fortune to inherit the title?’

He did not sound as though he considered himself very fortunate. ‘All I can do, in honour, is to ensure that if it is a boy he will one day inherit, as my heir. It might not be legally imperative, but it most certainly is morally. No one will suspect—a child is presumed to be the offspring of its mother’s husband. With any luck the birth will be full term or later—I believe that is not uncommon with a first child. We will have been assumed to have anticipated matters a trifle, however late it is.’

‘Then people will believe you had—’

‘I am Hadleigh,’ he interrupted her again. ‘After my brother, they expect that sort of behaviour from the viscount, I have no doubt. It will be a one-week wonder, the gossip.’

‘But the staff here,’ she protested, swept along by his vehemence, knowing she had capitulated but still protesting, ‘they saw me arrive on the doorstep, on foot, sodden, having

obviously travelled on the common stage. That is not how you would treat your betrothed, surely?’

Elliott sat down again and reached for the claret. ‘Of course not, not if I knew you were coming. However, we simply use the truth about your difficult father, who does not approve of the immoral ways of the aristocracy and who has forbidden our marriage, despite the fact you are of age. His temper is such that you felt you had to run away to me before your condition became obvious and not wait for wedding preparations. You said nothing when you arrived to indicate that you were expecting to see Rafe and not me, did you?’

Bella shook her head. ‘No. I behaved as confidently as I could and I only used your title. I feared the butler would show me the door before I could get to Rafe if I did not.’

There had to be something wrong with this, somehow. Her child would be legitimate? She was going to become the Viscountess of Hadleigh after all, despite her shame, despite her ruin? Yes, there had to be some catch, something she had not seen. Things that were too good to be true normally were just that. This seemed the perfect solution—but it would be like a diamond with a huge flaw in its heart. She felt too tired and dizzy and confused to think it through and find that flaw.

‘You have had enough for one day, I suspect.’ Elliott was at her elbow and she had not even noticed him move. ‘You are in a delicate condition, you have travelled too far and you have had a shock.’

‘Yes.’ She was beyond arguing now; he was too strong to resist. And she should not resist in any case, but some voice kept nagging that she should not do this to him, that he did not deserve it. She had been prepared to make a sacrifice for her child; she had not expected the victim to be an innocent man.

‘I cannot think straight any longer. We must talk again, but I would like to retire if I may. Your great-aunt and your cousin—what will you tell them, my lord?’

‘Why, the truth, of course.’ He eased back her chair and waited while she got to her feet. ‘That ours has been a most secret and rapid courtship, and, given your father’s irrational opposition, I intend marrying you by licence just as soon as I can lay my hands on one. Which is going to involve an early trip to Worcester tomorrow to see the bishop.’

She ought to say something, but it felt like trying to walk into a strong wind. ‘You should stop calling me *my lord*,’ he added just before they reached the door. ‘We must appear to be on intimate terms.’

‘Elliott,’ she repeated obediently. It was a more solid name than *Rafe*, more real somehow. He *was* real, she realised. He was the only reality between her and utter ruin. Rafe was dead and she was safe from him, at least. But he had been the devil she knew. This brother she did not know at all. ‘This is...I don’t feel—’

‘And it would be as well if you were to come with me to Worcester, if you are up to travelling tomorrow. I expect you will need to do some shopping. Then back here by evening and we

will be married the next day. Which reminds me, I must send a note down to Mr Fanshawe, the rector.'

'Married the day after tomorrow?'

'The sooner the better, don't you think? I have met the bishop before, which is fortunate. George Huntingford. Bit of a dry stick, but not inclined to be awkward. He won't have come across your father, will he?'

'I have no idea. But, Elliott, I cannot just confront a bishop and pretend—'

'Pretend what?' Elliott enquired with infuriating logic. 'You are of age, you are who you say you are and you are free to marry. There is no deception.'

'I do wish you would let me finish a sentence,' Bella said, her temper sparking through the fog of exhaustion. He was right, of course—why could she not simply accept it? She swallowed the tears of frustration, tried to think rationally. Was this really the right thing to do? It seemed so easy, far too easy. Perhaps she was dreaming.

'You are not very coherent tonight,' Elliott said in response to her protest. 'It is hardly surprising, but if I waited for you to finish we would be here until the small hours.' They looked at each other, his expression mildly exasperated, hers set into a frown that was probably making her even plainer than usual. He must surely be studying her and wondering what on earth he had done to deserve this.

It was irrational and ungrateful, but she was so angry with him,

all of a sudden. He was utterly in control and she could do nothing because he was right: this was the best thing for her child. Her fists clenched; deep inside she knew that the man she wanted to strike was not him, but his brother. Striking the man who was going to save her and the baby from this nightmare was madness, but the temptation was strong. It did not help either that she had the conflicting desire to simply lean against his chest and sob.

‘No, I am not very coherent.’ Bella made herself speak moderately. ‘I am usually calm, sensible, coherent and responsible. And before you say anything, losing my virtue to your brother before marriage was none of those things, I am well aware. But he...but I...’

‘Your emotions overcame all else?’ Elliott suggested, not unkindly.

‘Exactly.’ Bella clasped her hands tightly. ‘I do not know if you have ever been in love, Elliott?’ *Or are now. No, surely he would not have suggested this if he had any ties to another woman?*

‘No,’ he admitted to her intense relief. ‘There is no one.’

‘It sweeps away everything. It was the most powerful thing I have ever experienced.’ Of course, it must have been only the illusion of love or she would have clung to Rafe, wanted him even when he hurt her and spurned her. It made it worse, somehow, that even her own emotions had deceived her. ‘And just now I am bereft, tired, frightened, confused and adrift. And shocked. I presume you have never experienced any of those emotions either?’ He did not look like a man who was easily discommoded.

‘I have been shocked, certainly. Very recently.’ The corner of his mouth moved in what was either a grimace of pain or a sardonic smile. ‘You will agree that you have had a little longer to become used to your condition than I have.’

‘I have had even less opportunity to become used to the notion that I am to marry a complete stranger and become a viscountess,’ she began and then caught herself as her voice trembled. Elliott was being quite incredibly forbearing. And honourable. And she had put him in a most difficult position. ‘You are being very kind.’ That provoked a quizzical lift of one eyebrow. ‘I do appreciate what you are doing for me, for the baby, but please, may we talk about this in the morning?’

‘We can talk on the way to Worcester. I will collect you at eight, if you think you will be well enough for an early start.’

Bella swallowed. It was no effort to be up and breakfasted by then; at the vicarage everyone rose at six. But at that time in the morning her uncertain stomach was at its worst and just now she felt as if she could sleep for a week. ‘Perfectly, thank you, I will be ready then.’

Her cloak was almost dry and the rain had stopped. Elliott insisted on carrying her valise to the carriage and then helped her out after the silent ten-minute drive. In the darkness Bella could make out a four-square house sitting in a hollow.

‘The Dower House.’ They waited for several minutes until the door creaked open to reveal an ancient butler who peered out at them as they stood in the wavering light of the lantern he held.

‘My lord? My lady has retired some time since. Miss Dorothy is in the small parlour, my lord.’

‘Thank you, Dawson, we can announce ourselves. Miss Shelley will be staying for two nights if you could organise a room for her, and a maid.’

‘My lord.’ The old man shuffled off mumbling, ‘Maid, room, fires’, to himself.

‘Dawson is about ninety,’ Elliott explained, ‘but he refuses to be pensioned off. Mind the lap dog, it will yap, but I doubt it will bite.’ As he spoke he opened a door and stepped inside. ‘Cousin Dorothy, forgive this late call.’

The dog did indeed yap. And Miss Dorothy exclaimed and dropped her tatting and it took several minutes to restore order. ‘Your betrothed?’ she enquired, peering myopically at Bella when Elliott began to explain. ‘How wonderful. Had you told me, Elliott dear? I do not recall, and I am sure I would have done.’

‘No, Cousin. Arabella has had to run away as her father does not approve of me.’

‘Of *you*? Why ever not? If it had been that rascal Rafe, God rest his soul, one could understand. But *you*, Cousin?’

‘Politics,’ Bella explained, feeling as though she was in an opium-eater’s nightmare now, things were so unreal. ‘Papa is a—’ She realised she had no idea where Elliott’s allegiances might lie.

‘Tory,’ he finished for her, his interruption for once welcome.

Miss Dorothy, who was about fifty, plump and rather vague, nodded. ‘Oh, politics. That would explain it.’

‘We will be married the day after tomorrow,’ Elliott pushed on. ‘So if you could find Arabella a bedchamber for two nights, that would be very helpful. I did mention it to Dawson as we came in and I expect he’s gone to speak to Mrs Dawson.’

‘They will see to all that.’ Miss Dorothy beamed at Bella. ‘I do enjoy being a chaperon. One gets so little opportunity now Mama is frailer and we no longer go to many parties, but I used to look after all my nieces.’

‘It is very kind of you, ma’am.’ Bella dredged up her last reserves of will-power and did her best to behave politely. She felt as though she had been pushing against a locked door and it had suddenly opened, tipping her into space. She was still falling. ‘I am sorry, I am afraid I do not know how I should address you.’

‘Well, I am Miss Abbotsbury, but everyone calls me Miss Dorothy, my dear. Now, have you had your supper?’

‘Yes, Miss Dorothy, thank you.’

‘And have you brought a nightgown and a toothbrush? Elliott, where are you going?’

‘Home, Cousin.’ He paused at the door. ‘I was just about to bid you both goodnight.’

‘Without kissing Miss Shelley?’ Miss Dorothy simpered. ‘Such unromantic behaviour! I am not such a fierce chaperon as all that, Elliott.’

‘Of course not. Arabella.’ He came and took her hands in his and looked down at her face. It was an effort not to cling. She had known him a few hours and now this stranger was all she

had. 'It will be better in the morning, you will see.' And then he bent and kissed her cheek, his lips and breath warm for the fleeting moment of contact. Bella had an impression of claret and spice before he straightened up and she made herself let go. 'I will collect Miss Shelley at eight, Cousin, if an early breakfast will not inconvenience you.'

'Not at all.' The chaste kiss appeared to have satisfied Miss Dorothy's romantic expectations. She beamed at him as he left, then turned to Bella. 'Well, my dear, I expect you would like to go to bed, would you not?'

'Yes, please, Miss Dorothy.' At last a question she could answer with perfect honesty and without having to think. The cosy, cluttered room was beginning to sway slightly. 'That would be delightful.'

Elliott sat in the closed carriage outside the Dower House at a quarter to eight the next morning and made mental lists. It was that or pull out the flask of brandy secreted in the door pocket and drown every one of the obligations Rafe had landed him with. Especially this one.

It would have been a perverse comfort to be able to mourn his brother and perhaps he was, even if what he was mourning for was the brother he never had: the close friend, the trusting companion. Rafe, jealous and suspicious, had never wanted to allow anyone close, even at the end.

But maudlin thoughts about brotherly love, or the lack of it, were no help in dealing with a neglected estate, over a hundred

dependents, financial affairs that were tangled beyond belief and this latest obligation.

He was, it seemed, to be married to the plain daughter of an obscure vicar. Why could he not have done what she asked and pensioned her off with enough money to support the fiction of a respectable widow? His damnable conscience, he supposed. Sometimes Elliott thought he had been given his brother's conscience as well as his own, for Rafe had certainly not appeared to possess one.

Yesterday evening it had been very clear what he must do, where his duty lay as a man of honour. If she had come to him after the child had been born, then he would not have offered marriage, for that would not have legitimised the baby. But she *had* come and he had been given the opportunity to do what was right.

All his adult life, it seemed, he had been attempting to make up for the damage Rafe had wrought to the estate, to his dependents, to those who crossed his path, and until now he had never been able to do more than stop one young sprig blowing his brains out after Rafe had ruined him at cards. Now all the wreckage had landed at his feet, as though a great storm had thrown it up on to a beach, and he must try to repair everything at once.

The little country lass had been so desperately bedazzled by his irresponsible rake of a brother that she had gone against everything she believed in—he had no doubt that she had been a

chaste and virtuous young woman. But why should that surprise him? Rafe Calne had possessed the power to fascinate even the most intelligent women. It had always mystified Elliott how he had done it.

He rarely had trouble attracting female interest himself, but none of the women concerned ever appeared to have suspended every iota of common sense or judgement in the relationship as they did with Rafe.

He suspected that Arabella Shelley was not unintelligent, simply ashamed, frightened and confused. She was also angry with him, whether she acknowledged it or not. He was alive and standing in the place of the man she wanted to confront and force to acknowledge his responsibilities.

She had not known Rafe at all or she would never have fallen for him—she was not the sort of woman who wanted to flirt with danger. It hurt to acknowledge it, but Rafe had been a vicious, debauched, scheming rake who hid his true nature under a mask of charm when it suited him. And that charm had obviously deceived her all too well, for Elliott doubted that Arabella realised just how fortunate she had been. What if Rafe had lured her away to London and then abandoned her? It did not bear thinking about.

Best to put it behind them if they could. He was to be married and he had better accept it and move on from there as he hoped Arabella would.

He had never expected to find love in marriage, he thought as

he stared unseeing out of the carriage window at the unweeded drive. He supposed he had that in common with most men of his class. But neither had he expected to take a wife who was not a virgin, one who was carrying someone else's child. They would have to become accustomed to that, somehow. It would be like wedding a widow virtually from her husband's open graveside.

He grimaced at the macabre image. He must think positively. Surely Arabella would recover soon enough from the shattering of her infatuation with Rafe and the cruel realisation that she had been deceived. They could put it behind them and build a marriage based on reality.

It was, after all, time he settled down. He was thirty now. That had come as something of a shock. He had been teasing a small group of giggling young ladies at Almack's in March and had suddenly realised just how young they were. He could not go on flirting for ever, dodging the matchmaking mamas.

In the past few months he had begun to identify suitable young ladies who would make eligible brides and he had accepted an invitation to the Framlinghams' house party that would have given him time with a number of them, including Lady Frederica Framlingham.

Frederica was charming, assured and pretty. He suspected she would not be averse to an offer from him. Under the circumstances it was fortunate that the funeral, and then all the work he had found himself dealing with, had taken him from Town close to the end of the Season and before the house party

convened and he could commit himself with Frederica.

The timing might work out well. Arabella would have until February to become used to her new role, to give birth and to prepare to make her dèbut next Season. Elliott pulled out his notebook and jotted a note to have the Town house refurbished. The front door opened. He pulled out his watch: on the stroke of eight. His betrothed was prompt.

Chapter Four

‘Good morning, Elliott.’ The footman helped Arabella in and he studied her face as she settled herself opposite him.

‘Good morning. Did you sleep well?’ She was pale and pinched and there were dark shadows under her eyes, which were bloodshot. He had never demanded beauty in his women, but he had expected a certain level of attractiveness. Miss Shelley was quite right, she was certainly plain. The image of Freddie Framlingham, pink cheeked, blue eyed, vivacious, flashed into his mind. Virginal, uncomplicated, good-natured Freddie.

‘Thank you, yes.’

Elliott knew that was a polite lie. She must have spent most of the night worrying. ‘Excellent.’ There was no point in telling her just how ill she looked. ‘There is Madeira wine and some dry biscuits in that basket.’

‘How thoughtful.’ The fleeting smile was a revelation. He stared at her; Miss Shelley, it seemed, was not quite so plain after all. Then the animation faded and once more she was wan and subdued. ‘I have had a very careful breakfast. I hope this nausea will not last much longer.’

He did not refer to the fact that it was more than morning sickness that was distressing her so. They had no need to speak of the circumstances. ‘You have a *confidante*, someone with experience of being with child?’ It occurred to him that she would

need one. Cousin Dorothy would be no help and Mrs Knight, his housekeeper, had her title from courtesy only. She too was a spinster.

‘Our laundry maid has six children,’ Arabella explained. ‘I heard all about her health throughout several pregnancies so I have some idea what to expect. But other than her, no. Papa did not encourage close friendships.’

‘Rest and a lack of anxiety should help.’ Elliott hoped he sounded more confident than he felt. What Arabella needed was some experienced female companionship, not an unknown husband whose knowledge of childbirth was entirely derived from the stud farm and the kennels.

‘A lack of anxiety?’ That expressive smile suggested that she was far from agreeing with his choice of words.

‘Now you know that your child will be secure,’ he temporised.

‘That is true.’ She hesitated, then said, ‘Elliott, are you quite sure about this? I lay awake thinking that you must be awake too. Awake and bitterly regretting what you had done.’

‘I thought you want what is best for your child.’

‘I do, but this is not your fault.’

‘It is, however, my responsibility.’ Damn it, he was beginning to sound like the prosy bore Rafe had accused him of becoming. ‘A gentleman does not go back on his word.’

‘No, Elliott. Of course not.’ Arabella seemed to withdraw into herself.

So now he felt like a prosy bore who had kicked a kitten.

He consulted his notebook. Might as well carry on behaving like a dull, domineering husband—at least that involved no messy, uncomfortable emotion.

‘We will call on my lawyer, Lewisham, this afternoon and he will draw up the settlement so that you and the child are protected. I will also organise your allowance and arrange to have it paid to you quarterly, if that is convenient.’

‘An allowance for housekeeping?’ Arabella queried. He could see her making herself pay attention and wondered if dragooning her into coming to Worcester had been a good idea. But the alternative was to leave her with Dorothy and there she would have to pretend all the time.

‘No, for your personal use. For gowns and whatever else you wish to spend it on. I thought fifty pounds, but you will let me know if it is not enough.’

‘A year?’ She was staring.

‘No, a quarter.’

‘Two *hundred* pounds? I can afford a maid.’ She looked more stunned than pleased. She was way out of her depth, he realised. That was another thing that had not occurred to him—he was going to have to show her how to go on at this level in Society.

‘I will pay for your maid, and later for the nurse and the nursery maid. And an allowance for the child. This is all for you, Arabella. We will discuss the housekeeping later, but you have Mrs Knight, who has been housekeeper for about ten years and she is very experienced. You will not have much to do in that

department.'

'I know all about housekeeping,' she said with a touch of asperity. 'This will just be a matter of scale. But what am I to spend all that money on?' Then that unguarded smile reappeared. It was impossible not to smile back. 'Books! I can join a subscription library and have them sent. And journals. And embroidery silks—I would like to do fine work and not just darning and knitting. And then patterns for baby clothes.' Her hand came to rest, unconsciously, on her midriff and something twisted inside him that he could not identify. The baby was real, suddenly, not just an abstraction or a problem. Rafe's child. Elliott felt a strange pang, almost apprehension. He shook his head to clear it.

'And later you should have a dancing master. You will be called upon to dance very frequently, next Season. We will go up to London when you have recovered from the birth. Then you can have lessons, buy your ball gowns and court gown.'

'Court. Balls. Oh, my.' The smile faded. 'Elliott, I fear I am well out of my depth.'

'But I am not. I am used to the London Season, I have many friends in Town. You will soon find your feet and become an accomplished hostess.' And by then she would not rely so much on him. Life could get back to normal. He would attend sporting events, Jackson's Boxing Salon, his clubs. During the Season they would go to parties and to balls. And she would go shopping, make calls, look after the child. Out of Season they would

pay visits and live in the country. It was all very simple. No mistresses, of course. And no flirting.

‘Thank you, you are very kind.’ She fell silent and he let his notebook drop on to the seat and instead studied her face.

‘You are quite easy to be kind to, Arabella.’ He found that was true. But what would she be like when she had recovered her confidence and found her feet? ‘Any husband would do as much.’ *Husband. This time tomorrow, and we will be in church. Will I make a good husband? A good father?* There was that odd pang again. ‘We are nearly there. Will you come with me to see the bishop?’

‘I think I should.’ She fiddled with her lank bonnet strings. ‘He is going to think me a dowdy match for a viscount.’

‘Would you like to buy a new bonnet first? And a new reticule? What you are wearing is perfectly acceptable, if plain.’ Actually it was downright dull, but it would not boost her confidence to have him say so. ‘But if it would make you more comfortable to have something new, we do have plenty of time. In fact, we could see to all your clothes shopping.’ He rather enjoyed shopping with women, even spoiled and petulant mistresses. This country mouse would be amusing, exposed to the modest sophistication of the county town.

‘Thank you.’ Arabella bit her lip, obviously not thinking about bonnets. It would be entertaining to spoil her a little, make clothes a source of pleasure for her, rather than a necessity. ‘I do not think we should mention who Papa is to the bishop, do you? I

would rather he does not know where I have gone. Not yet.'

'As you wish.' She nodded and fell silent and there did not seem much more to say. He saw her wipe a tear surreptitiously from the corner of her eye. But there was a great deal to think about.

'Here we are—Worcester. See, there is Fort Royal, just ahead on the right as we go down the hill.'

Bella sat up straight and told herself to pay attention. Elliott appeared perfectly at his ease, businesslike even, with his notebook and his plans for her. The image she had begun to build of him last night, formed from the glimpses of rueful laughter, the decisive way he had dealt with her, the feeling that beneath the kindness was a man with a hint of danger about him, wavered. This was a rather solid, very responsible man. Just the sort one would wish for in a husband, she told herself.

This was all so strange, and so dangerously comfortable—an allowance beyond her wildest dreams, a new bonnet, a comfortable carriage, talk of ball gowns and dancing lessons.

Bella tried to look at Elliott objectively as he stared out of the window, his face a little turned from her. There was something about the way he held himself, something in the concentration with which he watched the passing scene that had her revising her opinion again. No, Elliott Calne was no stolid and indulgent benefactor, however kind and honourable he appeared.

Seeing the set of his jaw, she thought that she would not want to cross him. There was a feeling of power and force about him

that his brother had not possessed, a suppressed energy as though he was confined within the clothing and trapping of an aristocrat, but wanted to shed them, do something explosively physical. He was a man who had an aim in life, not one aimlessly filling time.

Elliott sat back and took some papers from his pocket, bent over his notebook again and jotted what looked like calculations. Surely not her allowance still? He dropped a letter on the seat. Reading it upside down, she could see the words...*your instructions, have sold the stocks at a most advantageous price and have invested in the company you mentioned to the extent of one thousand pounds...*

No. Not her allowance, but business. Her husband must be a rich man. *You will be all right, Baby*, she promised. *You will grow up healthy and protected and you will never know your papa did not want you. I will love you and Elliott will be your papa instead and he will ensure your future.* It was easy to be glad of his money and his title for the baby's sake. But she felt uncomfortably mercenary to accept it for herself. She had sinned and now she was being rewarded. Yet without the marriage her child would not be legitimate, she reminded herself. Her own feelings and sensibilities must come second.

The carriage drew up and she looked out to find that they were in a busy street, lined with bow-fronted shops. 'I am sorry to be such an expense to you,' she said without thinking. 'And should we not be in mourning?'

'You are to be Lady Hadleigh and you must do the title credit.

There is nothing to thank me for. And we have no family tradition of wearing mourning, certainly not in the country. Come.' And he held out a hand.

Bella stepped out of the carriage on to the flagstones. The sudden thought that this was the first step into her new life made her stumble. She was shopping to find a bonnet worthy of a bishop and the wardrobe of a countess. She would do it. And, somehow, she would learn to make this man a good wife.

Elliott caught her elbow and steadied her. She managed to smile at him and he smiled back, probably with relief that she was not being ill or difficult. A pair of young ladies passed them and she saw them glance at Elliott, their casual gaze sharpening as they looked. He really was a very attractive man, she realised, her lips tightening as she caught him returning the scrutiny.

He was taller and leaner—harder—than his brother. His smile was as ready, but no doubt far more genuine. Not as pattern-book good looking as Rafe, Bella thought critically, striving for detachment, but more overtly masculine. Dangerous in quite a different way to Rafe because it was less showy. This was a man who was utterly comfortable and confident in his masculinity. Elliott did not appear to feel the need to prove anything to anyone except himself. She felt a flutter of emotion that, for once, was neither apprehension nor nausea. Not, surely, attraction? No, not after what she had experienced with Rafe, she thought, hiding the shiver.

'Here we are.' Elliott had guided her along the pavement and

into a milliner's shop without her realising. Bella pulled herself together and stared round at the hats on display. She probably looked like a child inside a confectioners, but she could not help herself studying the delicious concoctions with longing.

‘*Monsieur*—but, no, I must say, *my lord*, is it not so?’ A tall woman of a certain age swept down on them, obviously very familiar with Elliott. Which was interesting. Bella slid a sideways glance at him, distracted from her preoccupations. Did he bring his mistresses in here?

‘Indeed, Madame Cynthie. And send all my accounts to Hadleigh Old Hall from now on, if you please. This lady, Miss Shelley, is to marry me tomorrow and she requires a bonnet for that occasion and one to meet the bishop this afternoon.’

‘Ah!’ Madame cast up her hands in delight before pouncing on Bella’s bedraggled bonnet strings. ‘And what colour is the wedding gown, Miss Shelley?’

‘Er...’ Elliott was no help, he merely lifted his brows at her in an infuriating manner. ‘Green. Pale leaf green.’ That was the gown she had dreamed about while she was waiting for Rafe: a dress the colour of spring.

Half an hour later the perfect wedding bonnet, wreathed in veiling and tied with bunches of utterly frivolous green ribbon, was in its box and Bella was staring blankly at two more perfect hats. She was not used to choice. The one with the cherry-red ribbons made her rather mousy brown hair seem darker and shinier and was very dignified. But the one with the bunch of

primroses tucked under the brim made her eyes look greener and was so pretty she wanted to smile just looking at it.

‘I cannot decide.’

‘Both, in that case.’ Elliott did not appear bored at having to lounge around a milliner’s shop while she dithered, nor annoyed that he was now buying three bonnets and not two. ‘The red ribbons for Bishop Huntingford, I think. Put it on now. And throw the old one away,’ he added to the milliner. ‘Now for that reticule.’ He waited until they were outside the shop before adding, ‘And a green wedding gown.’

‘I will never find anything to fit at such short notice.’ She wanted to say that it did not matter, but, of course, it did. Elliott would be displeased if she did not look the part. The urge to demand that her old bonnet was packed up and returned to her died.

‘Nonsense. Here we are.’ Another little jewel box of a shop, this time a dressmaker’s. And another shopkeeper delighted to see his lordship and obviously used to having him on her premises. Elliott met Bella’s questioning glance with a look of bland innocence. Was he keeping a mistress? Of course he was, she must just learn not to mind about it. It would be easier with her emotions not involved; it was not as though she would be a real wife.

Mrs Sutton, could, of course, assist his lordship. She had just the gown and if Miss Shelley would only step into the fitting room to try it on, any alterations could be accomplished by mid-

afternoon.

‘And anything else you have to hand that would do,’ Elliott called after them. ‘Morning dress, afternoon dress, walking dress. Miss Shelley’s luggage met with an accident.’

Bella was almost speechless by the time she emerged, but Elliott was ruthless and took her firmly off to find more shops. Reticule, shoes and gloves were easily dealt with, but the lingerie shop was another matter altogether. ‘No.’ She found her voice and dug her heels in after one glance at the froth of lace and gauze in the window. There were no actual garments on display, but she could imagine them only too vividly. ‘I am not going in there with you.’

‘Very well. Will you be all right out here for one moment?’

‘Why, yes, but—’ Elliott walked calmly into the shop leaving her, and the laden footman, outside.

‘Right, in you go.’ He emerged after a few minutes. ‘Sanders, take the shopping back to the carriage and have it come round to collect Miss Shelley in half an hour. I will meet you at the Royal Oak.’ He tipped his hat to Bella and strolled off.

It was impossible to vent one’s feelings in front of the footman. Bella knew that she must preserve the illusion that she knew Elliott very well and not protest about having a stranger buy such intimate garments. She managed to keep a smile firmly on her lips, nodded to Sanders and went in.

It seemed Elliott had merely uttered a sentence containing the words *bride, wedding, tomorrow, everything* and left. After a

few minutes Bella mentally added, *outrageous, extravagant and indecent*.

‘This is transparent,’ she protested, peering over the top of the garment being held up before her. ‘And what is it, anyway?’ She would look like the loose woman she now was.

‘A nightgown, madam. Here is the *négligé* and the slippers to match. I thought this set as well? And this. Oh, yes, and this would be enchanting with your colouring, if I might be so bold. Millie, only the best Indian muslin for Miss Shelley’s underthings, mind. Oh, and that Swiss embroidery, as well. Now, stays...’

Whenever Bella tried to protest that there was enough the three assistants shook their heads and informed her that his lordship had been quite clear in his instructions and they would not dream of stopping until they had fulfilled them.

‘And handkerchiefs,’ the assistant said finally. ‘There. Now we will just pack them up, Miss Shelley, if you would like a cup of tea?’

It was almost worth it to see Sanders’s face as he was loaded up with dainty packages and bandboxes, striped and beribboned. Almost.

Elliott was lounging in a private parlour at the Royal Oak, the day’s newssheets spread out on the table, a jug of coffee by his side, but he got to his feet as she entered. ‘Coffee, Arabella?’

‘Thank you, no.’ Her stomach revolted at the smell. ‘Tea, please.’

She could almost pretend this was normal, sipping tea in a strange city, alone with a man she had known for less than twenty-four hours, wearing a fashionable bonnet and expecting to visit a bishop. This was the sort of thing—without the bishop, of course—that she had once dreamed of doing with Rafe. The room blurred and she swallowed, disciplining her thoughts.

Chapter Five

‘Is everything all right, Arabella?’ Elliott enquired. ‘Have you finished your shopping?’

‘Thank you, yes.’ Bella struggled between politeness and honesty. ‘I cannot help but feel that this has been an entirely too-extravagant morning.’

‘Did you not enjoy it?’ Elliott watched her over the rim of his cup and she could not decide whether he was amused or displeased at her lack of enthusiasm.

‘Of course not.’ *I have a mind above such frivolity.* But honesty won. ‘No...Yes, I did. Most of it. It was very pleasant to choose nice things.’ She felt herself colour up and his eyes crinkled at the corners in response. Elliott appeared to like her blushes, which was disconcerting. They had amused Rafe too, she reminded herself, sobering instantly.

‘It is the bare minimum, of course. But I thought that you would wish to have the *modiste* call privately at the Hall so you can discuss your requirements when...’ he waved a hand vaguely in front of himself ‘...your figure changes.’

‘Oh, yes.’ Something else to blush about. Perhaps it was better to abandon all pretence of modesty. ‘I think that will happen soon, but the current mode is helpful in disguising things.’

There was a tap at the door and a waiter began to bring in food. Bread and butter, some cold meats and cheese, fruit cake.

'You have to eat properly,' Elliott observed, buttering bread for her when she sat and just looked at the table.

'I know. I was thinking about something else.' Bella added a little chicken to her plate and told herself that the baby needed the food and she needed her strength. So far, thank goodness, she had developed none of the cravings for strange foods that Polly the laundry maid had reported. Coal and honey had been one messy result.

But men were not interested in such feminine things, she knew. Elliott was being very forbearing, even discussing her morning sickness. Years of subduing her own feelings and desires came to her rescue as she searched for acceptable conversation. 'Who will be at the wedding?' she asked.

'Cousin Dorothy, my great-aunt Lady Abbotsbury, if she feels up to it, and my friend and neighbour John Baynton, who will be my groomsman.' He frowned. 'Who can give you away?'

'Miss Dorothy?'

Elliott laughed, the first time she had heard him do so out loud. The sound made her smile, it was so infectious. 'She would love that, I am sure, but it would cause even more talk if we do something so unconventional.' His amusement vanished as he studied her face. 'What is it?'

'You sound just like Rafe when you laugh. It was the only time his voice was as deep as yours.' Rafe had laughed a lot. All the time, except when he was suddenly intense, gazing deep into her eyes, his own so blue. She had thought they must be the

bluest eyes in the world until she saw Elliott's, darker, more vivid, like deep ocean water with cold, dangerous currents beneath the warm surface.

'I am sorry. I must be a constant, painful reminder.' His lips thinned as he helped himself to a slice of beef and added mustard lavishly from the pewter pot. She must stop this, he did not need her throwing her memories of his brother in his face at every turn.

'No, not at all. I will become accustomed. It is simply a matter of self-discipline and I will learn to forget my experience with Rafe,' she added bleakly. Soon, surely, she would be able to look at him and not see Rafe's face like a translucent mask overlaying Elliott's? She had to remember that this was another man altogether, one she could trust, one who would not abuse her. She had to believe that.

'In the meantime I will endeavour not to laugh.'

Was that said sarcastically or was he in earnest? She would have to learn to read him if she was to be a good wife.

'Thank you, but that will not be necessary,' Bella murmured, fighting down the panic at the thought of everything she must learn. A good wife, a good mother and a good viscountess: three new roles to learn and so many things that she could do wrong. She ate another slice of bread. She was a competent, experienced housekeeper, so the domestic side of things held no terrors. She would love the baby, so she could trust her instincts there. Elliott would tell her what she needed to do to be a proper viscountess. But how was she to learn to be a good wife to a man she did not

know and did not love without blundering, hurting them both—assuming he ever cared enough to be hurt by her clumsiness?

‘Have you finished, Arabella?’

‘Thank you, yes.’ How long had she been sitting there brooding? ‘Is it time to go and see the bishop now?’

‘It is.’ He stood up and held out his hand to her. ‘Just curtsy, call him *My lord* and leave the talking to me. If he asks something difficult, simply look to me adoringly and I’ll deal with it. Can you do that?’

‘Yes,’ she said. It was becoming quite easy to think that Elliott was someone she could look to for help. Whether or not she could manage a look of adoration, she was less sure. She must remember that for him, this was strictly a matter of honour and duty, she must not come to rely upon him emotionally.

‘Thank you, my lord.’ Bella managed a creditable curtsy and took Elliott’s arm. In his other hand he held a wedding licence. *Soon*, she thought, *soon you will be safe, Baby*. Resisting the urge to back away, as though in the presence of royalty, she preceded Elliott out through the door, keeping silent because of the liveried footmen and a passing cleric with an armful of papers.

‘That went very well,’ Elliott observed as they walked across College Green behind the cathedral.

‘Yes,’ Bella agreed. To her relief the bishop had shown no surprise at Lord Hadleigh arriving with a redeyed, drab female on his arm and requesting a special licence. Elliott sounded quite pleased, not at all as though he was merely resigned to this

wedding. Her heart lifted a little. ‘Elliott, do you mind so very much?’

He caught her meaning and his lips firmed, making him look rather formidable. ‘I mind a lot less than I would having you and the child on my conscience. I told you, Arabella, this is my duty, you need have no fear that I will not perform it to the best of my ability.’

It was not his duty she was worried about, it was his feelings, but the wretched man seemed ready to discuss anything rather than those. ‘No, I was not—’ she began.

‘Elliott!’ The man crossing the greensward was as tall as Elliott, but darker, slimmer and, as a ready smile creased his face, apparently more light-hearted at the moment.

‘Daniel.’ Elliott held out his hand and as the other man shook it enthusiastically she saw he bore a resemblance to both Elliott and Rafe.

‘Good to see you out and about after the funeral. Who would have thought it? In his prime, poor Rafe. I am having trouble believing it. Difficult for you.’

‘You could say that. Arabella, allow me to introduce you to my cousin, Mr Calne. Daniel, Miss Shelley.’

Bella smiled and shook hands. They were friends, she could tell at once. Elliott and his cousin had exchanged looks that said more than they had put into words. Why had he not told Mr Calne at once that they were to be wed? Surely the more relatives present, the more normal the whole thing would appear, not

that she wanted to face them. Perhaps he thought she would be embarrassed. She nudged Elliott's booted foot with her toe and he looked down at her. 'I wonder if Mr Calne might not be free tomorrow?'

'Of course. Our interview with the bishop has sent my wits wandering, obviously.' He smiled. 'Daniel, you must congratulate me. Miss Shelley and I are to be wed.'

There was a moment while his cousin stared at Elliott blankly. Bella had the fleeting impression that he was very surprised indeed. Then he seemed to pull himself together. 'My dear fellow!' Mr Calne slapped Elliott on the back and beamed at Bella. 'My felicitations. And am I to guess from your reference to Bishop Huntingford that the ceremony is to be soon?'

'Yes, tomorrow. Miss Shelley's father does not approve the match, although she is of age, and things were becoming a trifle uncomfortable for her at home, so we have expedited matters.'

Bella took a firmer grip on Elliott's arm and smiled warmly, trying to look like a loving fiancée. 'Perhaps Mr Calne could solve our problem, dearest.'

Elliott's eyebrows rose a trifle at the endearment. 'Which one, my love?' he countered, the corner of his mouth twitching.

There are so many, Bella thought, fighting the impulse to smile back. 'Why, someone to give me away, of course.'

'Of course.' He smiled at her; obviously she had said the right thing. 'Daniel? Will you do that duty?'

'I would be honoured!' Mr Calne beamed at both of them and

Bella found herself smiling back. Elliott was pleased, at least one of his family was pleased and she liked the enthusiastic cousin.

‘Come for luncheon,’ Elliott said. ‘The ceremony will take place at three. You’ll stay the night?’

‘That would be delightful, if the new Lady Hadleigh has no objections. I have concluded my business in Worcester and I will be returning to my home, which is some way beyond Hadleigh Old Hall,’ he explained to Bella. ‘It would be most pleasant to break my journey. Now, I will bid you farewell—I am sure you would much prefer your own company just at the moment. I will see you this evening, Elliott. Until tomorrow, Miss Shelley.’ He resumed his hat and strode off.

‘He seems very pleasant,’ Bella commented. Elliott was silent and her heart sank. She had erred, been too forward, and they were not even married yet. ‘I am sorry,’ she ventured. ‘I’m afraid I—’

‘There is no need to apologise,’ Elliott said brusquely. ‘You are about to become the Countess Hadleigh, you are not the vicar’s daughter any longer.’

She *was* afraid, that was the problem—there were so many things she could get wrong—and now perhaps she had irritated Elliott and, whether he liked it or not, just now he was the only stable point in her universe. She bit her lip; it seemed at the moment that she had the strength for only one thing at a time, and a dissatisfied fiancé was one too many. *Courage*

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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