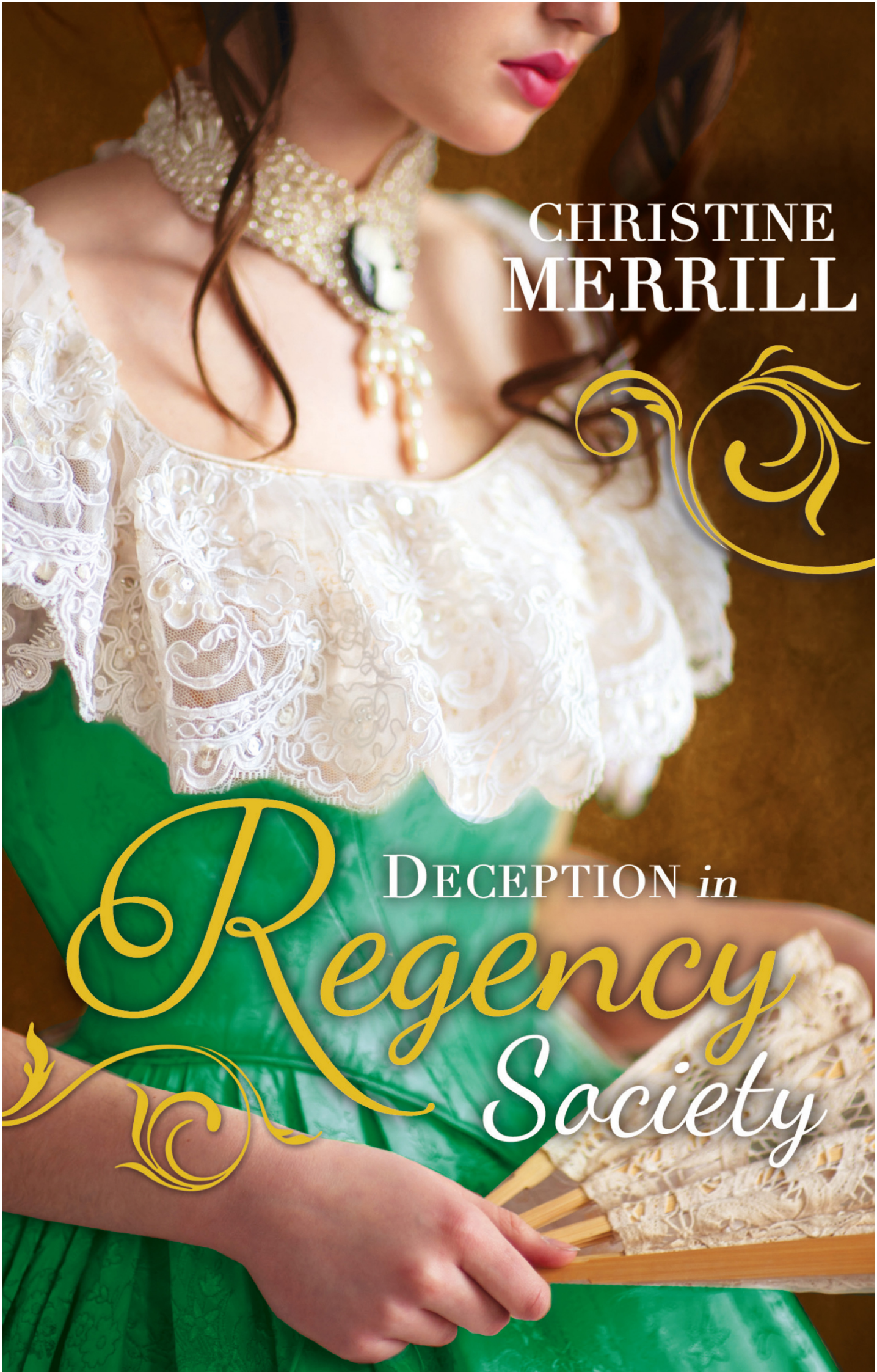

CHRISTINE
MERRILL
DECEPTION in
Regency
Society

Christine Merrill

Deception in Regency Society: A Wicked Liaison / Lady Folbroke's Delicious Deception

«HarperCollins»

Merrill C.

Deception in Regency Society: A Wicked Liaison / Lady Folbroke's Delicious Deception / C. Merrill — «HarperCollins»,

A Wicked LiaisonConstance Townley, Duchess of Wellford, has always been impeccably behaved, until she surprises a mysterious gentleman in her bedroom late at night. Her first instinct is to call for help, but when the thief apologises and kisses her for good measure, Constance knows that won’t be the last she sees of this intriguing rogue…Lady Folbroke’s Delicious DeceptionLady Emily Longesley married the love of her life and hoped that he would learn to love her. Instead, he upped and left their country estate for London. Three years on, needing an heir, Emily confronts her errant husband, to find that Adrian, Earl of Folbroke, has been robbed of his sight and doesn’t even recognise her!

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Regency Society

SEDUCTION in Regency Society August 2014
DECEPTION in Regency Society September 2014
PROPOSALS in Regency Society October 2014
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TEMPTATION in Regency Society June 2015
REVENGE in Regency Society July 2015

CHRISTINE MERRILL lives on a farm in Wisconsin, USA, with her husband, two sons, and too many pets—all of whom would like her to get off the computer so they can check their e-mail. She has worked by turns in theatre costuming, where she was paid to play with period ball gowns, and as a librarian, where she spent the day surrounded by books. Writing historical romance combines her love of good stories and fancy dress with her ability to stare out of the window and make stuff up.

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Regency Society
A Wicked Liaison
Lady Folbroke's Delicious Deception
Christine Merrill

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Copyright
A Wicked Liaison
Christine Merrill
To Maddie Rowe, editor extraordinaire.
You make this so much fun that I forget I'm working.

Chapter One

Anthony de Portnay Smythe sat at his regular table in the darkest corner of the Blade and Scabbard pub. The grey wool of his coat blended with the shadows around him, rendering him almost invisible to the rest of the room. Without appearing to—for to stare at his fellows might prove suicidally rude—he could observe the other patrons. Cutpurses, thieves, petty criminals and transporters of stolen goods. Rogues to a man. And, for all he knew, killers.

Of course, he took great care not to know.

The usual feelings of being comfortable and in his element were unusually disconcerting. He dropped a good week's work on to the table and pushed them towards his old friend, Edgar.

Business associate, he reminded himself. Although they had known each other for many years, it would be a mistake to call his relationship with Edgar a friendship.

'Rubies.' Tony sorted through the gems with his finger, making them sparkle in the light of the candle guttering on the table. 'Loose stones. Easy to fence. You need not even pry them from the settings. The work has been done for you.'

'Dross,' Edgar countered. 'I can see from here the stones are flawed. Fifty for the lot.'

This was where Tony was supposed to point out that they were investment-grade stones, stolen from the study of a marquis. The man had been a poor judge of character, but an excellent judge of jewellery. Then Tony would counter with a hundred and Edgar would try to talk him down.

But suddenly, he was tired of the whole thing. He pushed the stones further across the table. 'Fifty it is.'

Edgar looked at him in suspicion. 'Fifty? What do you know that I do not?'

'More than I can tell you in an evening, Edgar. Far more. But I know nothing about the stones that need concern you. Now give me the money.'

This was not how the game was to be played. And thus, Edgar refused to acknowledge that he had won. 'Sixty, then.'

'Very well. Sixty.' Tony smiled and held out his hand for the money.

Edgar narrowed his eyes and stared at Tony, trying to read the truth. 'You surrender too easily.'

It felt like a long hard fight on Tony's side of the table. Tonight's dealings were just a skirmish at the end of the war. He sighed. 'Must I bargain? Very well, then. Seventy-five and not a penny less.'

'I could not offer more than seventy.'

'Done.' Before the fence could speak again, he forced the stones into Edgar's hand and held his other hand out for the purse.

Edgar seemed satisfied, if not exactly happy. He accepted the stones and moved away from the table, disappearing into the haze of tobacco smoke and shadows around them, and Tony went back to his drink.

As he sipped his whisky, he reached into his pocket to remove the letter and his reading glasses. He absently polished the spectacles on his lapel before putting them on, then settled his chin in his hands to read.

Dear Uncle Anthony,

We are so sorry that you were unable to attend the wedding. Your gift was more than generous, but it does not make up in my heart for your absence on my most happy of days. I hardly know what to say in thanks for this and so many other things you have done for my mother and me over the years. Since Father's death, you have been like a second father to me, and my cousins say the same.

It was good to see Mother finally marry again, and I am happy that Mr Wilson could be there to walk me down the aisle, but I cannot help but think you deserved the position more than he. I do not wish my marriage or my mother's to estrange me from your company, for I will always value your wise counsel and your friendship.

My husband and I will welcome your visit, as soon as you are able.

Your loving niece, Jane

Tony stopped to offer a prayer of thanks for the presence of Mr Wilson. His sister-in-law's discovery of Mr Wilson, and marriage to same, had stopped in its tracks any design she might have had to see Tony standing at the altar in a capacity other than loving brother or proud uncle.

Marriage to one of his brothers' widows might have been expedient, since he had wished to involve himself financially and emotionally in the raising of their children, but the idea always left him feeling squeamish. Not an emotion he sought, when viewing matrimony. Seeing the widows of his two elder brothers well married, in a way that did not leave him legshackled to either of them, had been a load off his troubled brow.

And the wedding of young Jane was another happy incident, whether he could be there to attend or no. With the two widows and only niece comfortably remarried, all to gentlemen that met his approval, he had but to worry about the boys.

And, truth be told, there was little to worry about from either of his nephews, the young earl or his brother. Both were settled at Oxford, with their tuitions paid in full for the duration of their stay. The boys were sensible and intelligent, and appeared to be growing into just the sort of men that he could wish for.

And it left Tony—he looked at the letter in front of him. It left him extraneous. He had hoped, when at last he saw the family set to rights, to feel a rush of elation. He was free of responsibility and the sole master of his own life. Now that the time had come, it was without joy.

With no one to watch over, just what was he to do with his time? Over the years, he had invested wisely for the family as well as for himself, and his forays into crime had been less and less necessary and more a relief from the boredom of respectability.

Now that he lacked the excuse that there were mouths to feed and no money in the bank, he must examine his motivations and face the fact that he was no better than the common criminals around him. He had no reason to steal, save the need to feel the life coursing through him when he hung by drainpipes and window sills, fearing detection, disgrace or, worst of all, incarceration, and knowing every move could be his last.

No reason save one, he reminded himself. There was a slight movement in the heavy air as the door to the tavern opened and St John Radwell, Earl of Stanton, entered and strode purposefully towards the table.

Tony slipped the letter back into his pocket and tried not to appear too eager to have employment. 'You are late.' He raised his glass to the earl in a mocking salute.

'Correction. You are early. I am on time.' Stanton clapped Tony on the shoulder, took the seat that Edgar had vacated, and signalled the barman for a whisky. St John's smile was mocking, but held the warmth of friendship that was absent from others Tony typically met while doing business.

'How are things in the War Department?'

'Not so messy as they were on the battlefield, thank the Lord,' responded St John. 'But still not as well as they could be.'

'You have need of my services?' Tony had no wish to let the man see how much he needed the work, but he itched to do something to take away the feeling of unease he experienced as he read the letter. Anything which might make him feel needed again.

'I do indeed. Lucky for you, and most unlucky for England. We have another bad one. Lord Barton, known to his companions as Jack. He's been a naughty boy, has Jack. He has friends in high places, and is not afraid to use those connections to get ahead.'

'Dealing with the French?' Anthony tried not to yawn.

St John grinned. 'Better than that. Jack is no garden-variety traitor. He prefers to keep his crimes within the country. Recently, a young gentleman from the Treasury Department, while in his

cups and gaming in the company of Lord Barton, managed to lose a surprising amount of money very quickly. Young men often do, when playing with Barton.'

'Does he cheat?' Tony asked.

'I doubt he would balk at it, but that is not why the Treasury Department needs your help. The clerk's efforts to win back what he had lost went as well as could be expected. He continued to gamble and lost even more. Soon he was facing utter ruin. Lord Barton applied pressure and convinced the man to debase himself further still, to clear his debt. He delivered to Barton a set of engraving plates for the ten-pound note. They were flawed and going to be destroyed, but they are near enough to perfect to make the notes almost undetectable.'

'Counterfeiting?' Tony could not but help admire the audacity of the man, even as he longed to ruin his plans.

St John nodded. 'The clerk regretted his act almost immediately, but it was too late. Barton is now in a perfect position to destabilise the currency for his own benefit.'

'And you need me to steal your plates back.'

'You will be searching his home for an excessive number of ten-pound notes, paper, inks and, most especially, those plates. Use your discretion. Your utmost discretion, actually. This must not become a public scandal, but it must end immediately, before he begins circulating the money. We wish to break him quickly and quietly, so as not to upset the banks or the exchange.'

The earl dropped a full purse on the table. 'As usual, half in advance and half when the job is completed. Feel free to take an additional payment from the personal wealth of Barton and any associates you might need to search. He has homes in London and Essex. But it has been less than a week since the theft. I doubt he has had time to get the plates out of the city.' As an afterthought, Stanton added, 'You had best search his mistress's home, as well.'

'A criminal's mistress?' Tony grinned. 'You are sending me off to search the perfumed boudoir of some notorious courtesan? And paying me for the privilege.' He rolled his eyes. 'I fear what may become of me, if I am discovered by her. I had no idea that government service would hold such hardship.'

St John sighed with mock-aggravation. 'I doubt there will be any such threat to your dubious virtue, Smythe. The lady is of good character, or was until Barton got his hooks into her. The widow of a peer. It is a shame to see such an attractive young thing consort with the likes of Jack. But one never knows.' He scrawled an address down on a scrap of paper. 'Her Grace, the Dowager Duchess of Wellford. Constance Townley.'

Tony felt the earth lurch under him, as it always did when her name rose unexpectedly in a conversation. But this time, it was compounded by a thrill of horror at hearing it in the current context.

Oh, my God, Connie. What has become of you?

He took a careful swallow of the whisky before speaking. Any hoarseness in his voice could be attributed to the harsh spirit in his glass. 'The loveliest woman in London.'

'So they say,' St John responded. 'The second-loveliest, perhaps. She is a particular friend of my wife and I've often had the opportunity to compare them.'

'Night and day,' remarked Tony, thinking of Constance's shining black hair, her huge dark eyes, her pale skin, next to the fair beauty of Esme Radwell. In his mind, there was no comparison. But to be polite he said, 'You are a fortunate man.'

'As well I know.'

'And you say the duchess has become Barton's mistress.'

'So I have been told. It is likely to become most awkward in my home, for I cannot very well encourage Esme to associate with her, if the rumours are true. But Constance is often seen in Barton's company and he is most adamant about his intentions towards her in conversation with others. Either she is his, or soon will be.'

Tony shook his head in pretended sympathy, along with Stanton, and said, ‘A shame, indeed. But at least that part of the search will be of no difficulty. If the duchess is naïve enough to involve herself with Barton, then she might be unprepared to prevent my search and careless in hiding her part in the crime. When would you like results?’

‘As soon as can be managed safely.’

Tony nodded. ‘I will begin tonight. With Constance Townley, for she will be the weak link, if there is one. And you will hear from me as soon as I have something to tell.’

Stanton nodded in return. ‘I will leave you to it, then. As usual, do not fail me, and do not get caught. My wife expects you to dinner on Thursday and it will be damned difficult explaining to her if you cannot attend because I have got you arrested.’ He stood then, and took his leave, disappearing into the crowd and out the door.

Tony stared down into his glass and ignored the pounding blood in his ears. What was he to do about Constance? He had imagined her lying alone in the year following her husband’s death, and expected she would be quietly remarried to some honourable man soon after her period of mourning ended.

But to take up with Barton, instead? The thought was repellent. The man was a cad as well as a criminal. Handsome, of course. And well mannered to ladies. He appeared most personable, if you did not know the truth of his character.

But at thirty, Constance was no green girl to be dazzled by good looks and false charm. She might appear to be nothing more than a beautiful ornament, but Tony remembered the sharp mind behind the beauty. Even when she was a girl, she would never have been so foolish as to fall for the likes of Jack Barton. And the thought that she would willingly betray her own country…

He shook his head. He could not bring himself to believe it. If he must search her for Stanton, best to do it quickly and know the truth. And to do so, he must put the past behind him and clear his mind for the night’s work ahead of him. He finished the whisky, dropped a sovereign on the table for the barman, and went off into the night, to satisfy his curiosity as to the morals of the Dowager Duchess of Wellford.

Chapter Two

Tony did not need to refer to Stanton's directions—he knew well the location of the house in London where the dowager resided. He'd walked by it often enough in daylight for the twelve months that she'd been in residence. Without intending to observe the place, he'd given himself a good idea of the layout of rooms by watching the activities in the windows as he passed.

Her bedroom would be at the back of the house, facing a small garden. And there would be an alleyway for tradesmen somewhere about. He'd never seen a delivery to the front door.

He worked his way down the row of townhouses, to a cross street and a back alley, counting in reverse until he could see the yellow brick of the Wellford house. As he went, he pulled a dark scarf from his pocket and wrapped it around his neck to hide the white of his shirtfront. His coat and breeches were dark, and needed no cover. Greys, blacks, and dark blues suited him well and blended with the shadows as he needed them to.

The wrought-iron gate was locked, but he found an easy toe-hold in the garden wall beside it. He swung himself to the top with no difficulty, crouching in the protection of a tree. Then, he gauged the distance of open ground to the house. Four paces to the rose-bush, another two to the edge of the terrace and up the ivy trellis at the corner of the house. And, please God, let it hold his weight, for the three storeys to the bedroom window would be no problem to climb, but damned tricky should he fall.

He was across the yard and up the ivy in a flash, happy to find the trellis anchored to the brickwork with stout bolts, and a narrow ledge beneath the third-storey window sill. He walked along it in the darkness, feet sure as though he was walking down a city street.

He stopped when he reached the window he suspected was hers. If it had been his house, he would have chosen another room for solitude, but this one had the best view of the garden. When he had known her, she had enjoyed flowers and he'd been told that the gardens at the Wellford manor had been most splendid because of the duchess's attentions. If she wished to see the rose-bushes, she would choose this room.

He slipped a penknife under the frame, feeling along until he found the latch and felt it slide open with the pressure of the blade. Then he raised the sash a few inches, and listened at the gap.

There were no candles lit. The room was dark and quiet. He threw the window the rest of the way open, and listened again for an oath, an exclamation, anything that might indicate he had been heard. When nothing came, he stepped through the window and stood for a moment behind the curtain, letting his eyes adjust to the dim glow from the banked coals in the grate.

He was alone. He stepped further into the room, and was shocked to feel a wave of sadness and longing overtake him.

So it was not to be as easy as he'd hoped. The irrational jealousy he'd felt, when he'd heard she had found a protector so soon after leaving off her mourning, was burning away. He had hoped he could keep the anger fresh, and use it to protect his resolve when the time came to search her rooms. If she was no longer the innocent girl he remembered, but instead a traitorous whore, then she deserved punishment.

But he probed his heart and knew vengeance would be impossible, as would justice. If there was something to find in the room, he would find it.

And he would destroy it before St John Radwell and the government could ever see. He could not let Barton continue, but he would not let Constance be punished for her lover's crimes. If there was a way to bring her out of it with a whole skin, he would do it, no matter the cost to his own reputation.

He scanned the room. He had chosen well. It was definitely a lady's bedroom: large and high-ceilinged, decorated in rose with delicate furniture. Along the far wall, there was a soft and spacious bed.

Where the Duchess of Wellford entertained Jack Barton.

He turned away from it, looking anywhere but towards the bed.

He had expected to find a well-appointed boudoir, but this room was strangely empty. It was pretty enough, but almost monastic in its simplicity. On the walls there was no decoration. He ran his hands along the floral paper and felt for empty hooks. There should be sconces, there and there. And in the centre? A painting, perhaps, or a mirror with a gilt frame.

He strode across the room, to the wardrobe, threw open the doors, and was momentarily stunned by the scent of her. He closed his eyes and inhaled. Lavender. Had she always smelled this sweet? It had been so many years…

Eyes still shut, he navigated by touch through the dark wardrobe, his fingers playing along the back panels and feeling no spaces, no concealed latches. He patted the gowns and cloaks, feeling for lumps in pockets and finding none.

He opened his eyes again and went through the drawers, one at a time, feeling no false bottoms, nothing concealed between the dainties folded there. Silk and linen and fine Indian cotton. Things that had touched her body more intimately than he ever would. His fingers closed on a handkerchief, edged in lace and embroidered with a C. Impulsively, he took it and thrust it into his pocket, moving to the dresser to continue his search.

The Dowager Duchess of Wellford perched on the edge of her seat in her parlour, staring hopefully at the man on the couch next to her.

He was about to speak.

It was about time. He had been hinting for weeks.

She did her best to drum up a thrill of anticipation.

'Constance, there is something I wish to speak to you about.'

'Yes, Jeremy.' Jeremy Manders was not her ideal, of course, but neither had her late husband been, and they had suited well enough.

'We have known each other for a long time, since well before your husband passed. And I have always held you in high esteem.'

She smiled and nodded encouragement. 'And I you. You were Robert's good friend, and mine.'

'But I will admit, even while Robert was alive, feeling the occasional touch of envy at his good fortune in having you, Constance.'

She blushed and averted her eyes.

'I would never have dared say anything, of course, for Robert was my friend.'

She looked up again, still smiling. 'Of course not.' Her late husband, Robert, was far too much in the conversation for her taste.

'But you were quite the loveliest…still are, I mean, the loveliest woman of my acquaintance.'

'Thank you, Jeremy.' This was much better. She accepted the compliment graciously. But she wished that, just once, a man could comment on something other than her appearance.

'I hesitated to say anything, while you were still in mourning. It would hardly have been respectful.'

'Of course not.' He was hesitating to say it now, as well. Why could he not just go down on a knee and speak the words?

'But I think sufficient time has passed. And you do not appear to be otherwise engaged. I mean, you are not, are you?'

'No. My affections are not held by another, and I am quite out of my widow's weeds.' And growing older by the minute. Was it too much to expect him to seize and kiss her? That would make the point clear enough.

And it might be most romantic. But it would be too much to ask, and she forced herself not to wish for it.

'So there is no one else? Well, that is good to know.' He sagged with relief. 'I thought, if you were free, that we might do well together. You find me attractive, I hope.'

'Oh, yes, Jeremy.' She hoped it was not too obvious to a casual observer that she was reaching the point where she would find any man kind enough to offer marriage to be of surpassing handsomeness.

'And I assure you, I will be able to meet your expenses. I have ample resources, although I am not a duke, as your late husband was.'

Robert again. But Jeremy could afford to pay her bills, so let him talk. 'That is a great comfort to me.'

'And I would want you to get whatever gowns and frippery you might wish, as soon as possible. It must be most tiring to you to have to wear black for a year, and then to make do with what you had before.'

Shopping for things she did not need. She had quite forgotten what it was like. She smiled, but assured him, 'Really, it is only foolishness. It does not matter so much.'

'Oh, but it does to me. I wish to see you as bright and happy as ever you were.'

Relief flooded through her.

'I will provide a house, of course. Near Vauxhall, so that we might go there of an evening. And a generous allowance.'

'House?' The flood of relief became tainted with a trickle of doubt.

'Yes. And the dresses, of course. You could keep a staff, of…' he calculated '…three.'

'Three?'

'And your maid as well,' he amended. 'Which would really be four.'

'Jeremy, we are not negotiating my living arrangements.'

'Of course not. Any number you choose. I want you to be comfortable. And I brought with me a token of my esteem.' He reached into his pocket, and produced not a small square box, but one that was thin and slender.

She took it from him and snapped it open. 'You got me a bracelet?'

It was his turn to blush. 'There were matching earbobs. I could have got those as well, but perhaps after you say yes…'

'Jeremy, it sounds almost as though you are offering me a carte blanche.' She laughed a trifle too loudly at the ridiculousness of the idea.

She waited for him to laugh in return and say she was mistaken.

And he was silent.

She snapped the box shut again and thrust it back to him. 'Take it.'

'You do not like it? Because I can get another.'

'I do not want another. I do not want this one.' She could feel the colour in her face turning to an angry flush as her voice rose. 'You come here, talking of esteem, and your great fondness for me, then you offer to put me up and pay my expenses?'

Jeremy stiffened, a picture of offended dignity. 'Well, someone must, Constance. You cannot go on much longer living on your own. And surely, after twelve years of marriage, and over a year alone, you must miss the affections of a man.'

'Oh, must I?' she said through clenched teeth. 'I do not miss them so much that I seek to dishonour myself outside of marriage just to pay my bills. I thought, if you held me in such high esteem…'

'Well…'he swallowed '…here's the rub. Father will be wanting me to guarantee the inheritance. Now it's a long time before I need to worry about such. But when it comes time for me to marry, I will have to pick someone—' he searched for the correct words and finished '—that my father approves of.'

'And he will not approve of a thirty-year-old childless widow. That's what you're saying, isn't it, but you lack the spine to say it out loud? You wish to bounce me between the sheets and parade me

around Vauxhall in shiny new clothes. But when it is time for you to marry, you will go to Almack's for a wide-hipped virgin.'

Jeremy squirmed in his chair. 'When you say it that way, it sounds so—'

'Accurate? Candid? Cruel? It sounds cruel because it is, Jeremy. Now take your compliments and your jewellery and your offers of help and get them from my house.'

Jeremy drew himself up and gathered what righteousness he could. 'Your house? For how long, Constance? It is apparent to those who know you well that you are in over your head, even if you do not wish to admit it. I only meant to help you in a way that might be advantageous to both of us. And I am sure there are women who will not find what I'm suggesting so repugnant.'

There was that tone again. She had heard it before, when she'd refused such offers in the past. Reminding her not to be too particular, or to expect more than she deserved, but to settle for what was offered and be glad of it. She glared at him in silence and pointed to the door.

He rose. 'Very well. If you change your mind on the subject, send a message to my rooms. I will wait, for a time. But not for long, Constance. Do not think on it overlong. And if you expect a better offer from Barton, then you are sadly mistaken. You'll find soon enough that his friendship is no truer than mine. Good evening.'

He strode from the room, then she heard him in the hall calling for his hat and stick, and the adamant snap as the front door closed behind him.

She sat, staring into the fire, her mind racing. Jeremy was to have been the answer to all her problems. She had been so sure of it. She had been willing to overlook a certain weakness of chin and of character. She had laughed at his boring stories. She had listened to him talk politics, and nodded, even though she could not find it in herself to agree. And she had found him foolish, sober or in mirth. She had been more than willing to marry a buffoon, and smile and nod through the rest of her life, in exchange for a little security and consistent companionship.

Maybe Jeremy had been a fool, but an honest and good-hearted one, despite his offer. And he had been right when he'd hinted that anything was better than what Lord Barton might suggest, if she allowed him to speak to her again. Jeremy could at least pretend that what he was doing would be best for both of them. There had never been any indication, when she'd looked into Jack Barton's eyes, that he cared in the slightest about anyone but himself.

'Your Grace, can I get you anything?' It was her maid, Susan, come downstairs to see what was the matter.

Constance glanced up at the clock. An hour had passed since Jeremy had gone, and she had let it, without moving from the spot. 'No, I am all right. I think I will put myself to bed this evening, Susan. Rest yourself. I will see you in the morning.'

The girl looked worried, but left her in peace.

When Constance went to stand, it felt as if she had to gather strength from deep within for the minor effort of rising from the chair. She climbed the stairs with difficulty, glad that the maid was so easily persuaded. It would be better to crawl up the stairs alone on her hands and knees than to admit how hard a blow Jeremy had struck with his non-proposal.

Susan knew the trouble she faced. The girl had found her before when she'd come to wake her, still dressed and dozing in a bedroom chair. Constance had been poring over the accounts in the wee hours, finding no way to make the expenses match the meagre allowance she received from her husband's nephew, Freddy. If only her husband had taken him in hand and taught him what would be expected, Freddy might have made a decent peer.

But Robert had been so set on the idea that they would have a child. There would be an heir, if not this year, then certainly the next. And if his own son were to inherit the title, he might never need bother with his tiresome nephew.

And now Robert was gone, and the new duke was heedless of anything but his own pleasure. He knew little of what it took to run his own estates and even less what Robert might have expected of him in regards to the welfare of the dowager.

Dowager. How she loathed the word. It always brought to mind a particularly unattractive piece of furniture. The sort of thing one put in a seldom-used room, allowing the upholstery to become faded and moth-eaten, until it was totally forgotten.

An accurate enough description, when one thought of it. Her own upholstery was sadly in need of replacement, but with the butcher's bill and the greengrocer, and the cost of coal, she dare not spend foolishly.

Of course, she could always sell the house and move to smaller accommodations, if she had the deed in hand. She had seen it, the day her husband had drawn it up. The house and its contents were clearly in her name, and he had assured her that she would not want, when his time came.

Then he had locked it in his safe and forgotten it. And now, the new duke could not be troubled to give it to her. When she asked, it was always tomorrow, or soon. She felt her lip quaver and bit it to stop the trembling. She had been a fool not to remove the keys from her husband's pocket, while his body was barely cold. She could have gone to the safe and got the deed herself and no one need have been the wiser. Now the keys and the safe belonged to Freddy and she must wait upon him to do the right thing.

Which was easier than waiting upon her suitors to offer something other than their false protection. She had been angry the first time someone had suggested that she solve her financial problems on her back. When it had happened again, anger had faded to dread. And now, it had happened so many times that she wanted nothing more than to hide in her rooms and weep.

Was this the true measure of her worth? Men admired her face and wanted her body, there was no question of that. And they seemed to enjoy her company. But never so much that they could overlook a barren womb when it came time to wed. They wanted the best of both worlds: a wife at home, great with child, and an infertile mistress tucked away for entertainment so that they could remain conveniently bastardless.

Damn Jeremy and his empty promises. She had been so sure that his hints about the future were honourable.

What was she to do now, other than to take the offer, of course? It would solve all her worries if she was willing to bend the last little bit, and give up on the idea that she could ever succeed in finding another husband. She shut the door behind her and snuffed her candle, letting the tears flow down her cheeks in the dark.

And in a corner of the room there was movement.

She caught her breath and held it. It was not a settling of the house, or a mouse in the wainscoting. That had been the scrape of a boot on the wood floor near the dresser. And then something fell from the dresser top. Her jewellery box. She could hear the meagre contents landing like hailstones on the rug.

A thief. Come to take what little she had left.

Her fatigue fled. A scream would be useless. With all the servants safely below stairs, no one would hear her. To get to the bell pull, she would need to go closer to the thief, and he would never allow her to reach it. She turned to run.

The stranger was across the room and caught her before she could move, and a hand clamped down over her mouth.

Chapter Three

'Remain silent, your Grace, and I will do what I came for and be gone. You are in no danger from me, as long as you are quiet.'

His hand eased away from her lips, but he held her close in a most familiar way, one hand at the back of her neck, the other cupping her hip, and his legs bumping against the length of her.

And suddenly, she was sick and tired of men trying to sample the merchandise without buying, or wanting to rob her, or dying and leaving her penniless and alone. She fought to free her arms and stuck him hard in the face. 'I'll give you silence, you thieving bastard.' She hit him again, in the shoulder, but his hands did not move. 'Is that quiet enough for you, you dirty sneak?' And she beat upon him with her closed fists, as silently as possible, shoulders shaking with effort, gasping out tears of rage.

He took the rain of blows in silence as well, except for the occasional grunt when a well-landed punch caused him to expel a puff of air. And when her blows began to weaken he effortlessly caught her wrists and pinned them behind her. 'Stop it, now, before you hurt yourself. You'll bruise your hands, and do more damage to them than you might to me.'

She struggled in his grip, but he held firm until the last of the fight was gone from her and there was nothing left but tears.

'Finished? Good. Now, tell me what is the trouble.' He produced a handkerchief from his pocket and offered it to her, and she was appalled to recognise it as her own.

'Trouble? Are you daft in the head? There is a man in my room, holding me against my will. And going through my lingerie.' She crushed the linen square in her hand and tossed it at his feet.

'Before that.' She could barely make out his face in the embers from the banked fire, but there was sympathy in his voice. 'You were crying before you ever knew I was here. Truth, now. What was the matter?'

'Why do you care?'

'Is it not enough to know that I do?'

'No. You have a reason for it, and as a common thief, you must wish the knowledge to use against me in some way.'

He laughed, soft in her ear. 'I am a most uncommon thief then, for I have your interests in mind. Does it help you to trust me, if I assure you that I am a gentleman? If you met me under better circumstances, you'd find me a picture of moral fortitude. I do not drink to excess, I do not gamble, I am kind to children and animals, and I have loved only one woman the whole of my life.'

She struggled in his arms. 'And yet you do not shirk at sneaking into other women's bedrooms and taking their things.'

He sighed, but did not let her go. 'Sometimes, perhaps. But I cannot bear to see a woman in distress, and I do not steal from those that cannot afford to lose. In the box on your dresser there is a single strand of pearls and a pair of gold earrings. The rest is paste. Where is the real jewellery, your Grace?'

'Gone. Sold to pay my bills, as was much of the household furniture. You see what is there. Take it. Would you like the candlesticks from the mantel as well? They are all I have left of value. Take them and finish me.'

His grip upon her loosened, and he took her hand and bowed over it. 'I beg your pardon, your Grace. I mistook the situation. Things are not as they appear to the outside, are they? The world assumes that your husband's wealth left you financially secure.'

She gathered her dignity around her. 'I make sure of that.'

'Can you not appeal to friends for help?'

She tossed her head. ‘I find, when one has no husband to defend one’s honour, or family to return to, that there are not as many true friends as one might think. There are many who would prey upon a woman alone, if she shows weakness.’

‘But I am not one of them.’ He was still holding her hand in his and his grip was sure and warm. She thought, in the dimness, she could see a smile playing at the corners of his lips. ‘I have taken nothing from your jewel case. I swear on it. And the handkerchief?’ He shook his head. ‘I do not know what possessed me. I am not in the habit of rifling through women’s linens and taking trophies. It was a momentary aberration. I apologise and assure you that you will find nothing else missing from your personal items.’

She thought, for just a moment, how nice it would be to believe him and to think there was one man on the planet who did not mean to take more than she wished to give. ‘So you have broken into my rooms and mean to take nothing, then?’ she asked suspiciously.

Now she was sure she could hear the smile in his voice. ‘A trifle, perhaps. Only this.’ And he pulled her close again to bring her mouth to his.

The thief did not bother with the niceties. There was no gentle caress, no hesitation, no request for permission. He opened her mouth and he took.

She steeled herself against the violation, deciding, if it was a choice of the two, she had much rather he took a kiss than the candlesticks. It was foolish of her to have mentioned them, for she needed the money their sale would bring.

In any case, at least the kiss would be over soon and she did not need to spare his feelings and pretend passion where she felt none, as she had with Jeremy. But unlike Jeremy, this man was most expert at kissing.

Her mind drifted. His hand was on her shoulder and her head rested in the crook of his elbow, as he tipped her back in the cradle of his arms. It felt strangely comforting to be held by the stranger. She need barely support herself, for he was doing a most effective job of bearing her weight. She tilted her head slightly, and he adjusted, tasting her lips and her tongue as though he wanted to have every last bit of sweetness from them before letting her go.

She relaxed and gave it up to him. And was shocked to find herself willing to give him more. It had been a long time since she had felt so well and truly kissed. Her husband’s kisses, in recent years, had been warm and comfortable, but not particularly passionate. The kisses she’d received from suitors since his death were more ardent, but could not seem to melt the frozen places in her heart, or ease the loneliness.

But this man kissed as if he were savouring a fine wine. He was dallying with her, barely touching her lips and then sealing their mouths to steal the breath from her lungs.

His hands were gentle on her body, taking no further liberty than to support her as he kissed, and she knew she had but to offer the slightest resistance and he would set her free.

But she was so tired of being free, if freedom meant loneliness and worry. And suddenly, the kiss could not be long enough or deep enough to satisfy the craving inside of her. His hands stayed still on her body, but she wished to feel them do more than just hold her. She wanted to be touched.

Her own hands were clenched in fists on his shirtfront, and she realised that she’d planned to push him away before now. Instead she opened them, palms flat and fingers spread on his chest, before running them up his body to wrap her arms around his neck. The hair at the back of his head was soft, and curled around her fingers as she tangled them in it, pulling herself closer to kiss him back. He smelled of wood smoke and soap, and he tasted like whisky. And when she moved her tongue against his, he tensed and his hands went hard against her body, his thumb massaging circles deep into the flesh of her shoulder. His other hand tightened on the soft flesh of her hip to hold her tight to him. She could feel his smile, tingling against her lips.

And then, as quickly the kiss had begun, it was over. He set her back on her feet again and for a moment they leaned against each other, as though neither were steady enough to stand without

support of the other. When he pulled away from her, he shook his head and sighed in satisfaction. He was breathless, as he said, 'That is quite the richest reward I've taken in ages. So much more valuable than mere jewels. I will live on the memory of it for a very long time.' He traced the outline of her lips with the tip of his finger. 'I am sorry for frightening you and I thank you for not crying out. Know that your secrets are as safe with me as mine are with you. And now, if you will excuse me?' He bowed. 'Do not light the candle just yet. Count ten and I will be gone.'

And he turned from her and went to the window, stepping over the sill and out into the darkness.

She rushed to the window after him, and looked out to see him climb down the side of the house and slip across the garden as noiselessly as a shadow, before scaling the stone wall that surrounded it.

He paused as he reached the top and turned back to look towards her. Could he see her there, watching him go, or did he merely suspect?

But she could see him, silhouetted on the top of the garden wall. He was neither dark nor fair. Brown hair, she thought, although it was hard to tell in the moonlight, and dark clothes. A nice build, but she'd felt that when he'd held her. Not a person she recognised.

He blew a kiss in the direction of her open window, swung his legs over the side and dropped from view.

She hurried back into the room and fumbled with a lucifer and a taper, trying to still the beating of her heart. She might not know him, but he knew her. He knew the house and had called her by her title.

And now he knew her secret: she was helpless and alone and nearing the end of her resources. She found this not nearly as threatening as if Lord Barton had known the depth of her poverty. If he had, he'd have used that to his advantage against her.

But the thief had apologised, and taken his leave. And the kiss, of course. But he'd left everything of value, so it was a fair trade. She knelt to pick up the contents of the spilled jewel box, and her foot brushed a black velvet bag on the floor at the side of the dresser.

He must have brought it, meaning to hold the things he took. And it was not empty. As she picked it up, she felt the weight of it shift in her hands.

Dear God, what was she to do now? She could not very well call the man back. He was no longer in the street and she did not know his address.

She did not want to know his address, she reminded herself. He was a criminal. She would look more than forward to seek him out, after the way she had responded to the kiss. And the contents were not his, anyway, so why should they be returned? If the bag contained jewellery, perhaps she could put an ad in The Times, describing the pieces. The rightful owners would step forward, and she might never have to explain how she got them.

She poured the contents of the bag out into her hand. Gold. Guineas filled her hand, and spilled on to the floor.

She tried to imagine the ad she must post, to account for that. 'Will the person who lost a large sum of money on my bedroom floor please identify it…?'

It was madness. There was no way she could return it.

She gathered the money into stacks, counting as she went. This was enough to pay the servants what she owed them, and settle the grocer's bill and next month's expenses as well.

If she kept her tongue and kept the money, she could hold off the inevitable for another month.

But what if the thief came back and demanded to know what had become of his money? She shivered. Then she must hope that he was as understanding as he had been this evening. It would not be so terrible if she must part with another kiss.

Tony arrived at his townhouse in fine spirits, ignored the door before him and smiled at the façade. He rubbed his palms together once, and took a running start at it, jumping to catch the first handhold above the window of the front room. He climbed the next flight easily, his fingers and toes

fitting into the familiar places worn into the bricks, then leaned to grasp the edge of the balcony, chinning himself, swinging a leg up and rolling his body lightly over the railing to land on his feet in front of the open doors to his bedroom. He parted the curtains and stepped through. 'Good evening, Patrick.'

His valet had responded with an oath and seized the fireplace poker to defend himself, before recognising his master and trying to turn his movement into an innocuous attempt to adjust the logs in the grate. 'Sir. I believe we have discussed this before. It is a very bad habit, and you have promised to use the front door in the future, just as I have promised to leave it unlocked on nights when you are working.'

Tony grinned back at him. 'I am sorry. I could not help myself. I am—'

Deliriously happy.

'—full of the devil, after this evening's outing. You will never guess who Stanton sent me out to spy on.'

Patrick said nothing, waiting expectantly.

'The Dowager Duchess of Wellford.'

This was worthy of another oath from Patrick. 'And you informed him that you could not.'

'I did no such thing. He was under the impression that she was consorting with Lord John Barton, that they were in league in some sort of nefarious doings involving stolen printing plates. If he had not sent me, it would be someone else. I went post-haste to her rooms for a search. The climb to her bedroom window was—'

As easy as I've always dreamed it to be…

'—no problem. Thank the Lord, there was no sign of anything illegal hidden in her rooms. Although there is evidence that she is in dire straits and in a position to be forced to do things against her nature, by Barton or someone else. And then—and here is the best part, Patrick—while I was searching, she caught me at it.'

'Sir.' Patrick's tone implied that the word 'caught' was not under any circumstances the best part of a story.

'She caught me,' Tony repeated. 'And so I was forced to hold her tight, and question her. And because I wished to be every bit the rogue I appeared to be, I kissed her.'

'And then?' Patrick leaned forward with a certain amount of interest.

Tony sighed. 'And then she kissed me back.'

'And then?' Patrick prompted again.

'And then I climbed out the window and came home. But not before leaving her the purse that Stanton had given me to cover the night's work. I dare say she will not be required to sell the last of her jewellery for quite some time. St John was most generous. It was quite the most perfect evening I've ever had. What say you to that?'

Patrick dropped any attempt at servitude. 'I say, some day, when you are old enough to be shaved, you will be quite a man with the ladies. Ah, but wait. You are thirty, are you not? Then it is quite another matter.'

'And what would you have had me do?'

Patrick was working very hard not to make any of the more obvious suggestions, which might get him sacked. 'You might, at least, have told her the truth.'

'Just what part of it?'

'That you have been pining for her like a moon calf, low these long years.'

'I did tell her. Well, not the truth, as such. Not that truth, at any rate. I told her that she needn't be afraid, which is true. And that I was a most unexceptional fellow. And that I have loved one woman my entire life.' Tony frowned. 'I did not tell her it was her, as such. You might think a woman would be glad to hear that? But trust me, Patrick, when she is hearing it from a stranger who is hiding in her bedroom, it will not be well received.'

'But you are not a stranger to her.'

'But she does not know that. I did not have time to explain the full story. An abbreviated version of the truth, one which omitted my identity, was definitely the order of the day. And despite what you may think of my romantic abilities, I've told the story before and found that omitting the identity of my beloved works in my favour. Nothing softens the heart of a woman quite so much as the story of my hopeless love for another. And how can I resist when they wish to comfort me in my misery?'

'Sir,' said Patrick, in a way that always seemed to mean 'idiot'. 'If you are with the object of the hopeless passion, and you wish the passion to cease being a hopeless one, then the unvarnished truth is usually the best course.'

No longer hopeless…

Tony shook his head. A single kiss was a long way from the fulfilment of his life's romantic fantasies, and it would be foolish to set his heart upon it. 'Nothing will come from this night's meeting. Even if the whole truth is revealed. Think sensibly for a moment, Patrick. Much time has passed since I knew her. She barely knew me then. I doubt she even remembers me. She is a duchess, even if she is a dowager. And while I am her most humble servant, I am most decidedly not, nor ever will be, a duke. Or, for that matter, a marquis, an earl or even a baron. With me, she could live quite comfortably to a ripe old age.' He dismissed his own dreams on that subject with a wave of his hand.

'But should she attach herself to me, it would mean that many doors, which were once opened, would be closed to her. She would go from her Grace the Duchess to plain old Mrs Smythe. In the face of that, an offer of undying devotion is no equal. And the whole town knows her as the most beautiful woman in London. She will not want for suitors, and need not settle for the likes of me. She will aim higher, when she seeks another husband. Man is not meant to have all that he dreams possible. Not in this life, at any rate.'

Patrick applauded with mock-courtesy. 'Most humble, sir. I had forgotten that you studied for the ministry. You have done a most effective job of talking yourself out of the attempt. In winning the hand of a lady, it would be better if you had studied the Romans. Carpe diem, sir.'

'I carpe-d the situation to the best of my ability, thank you very much.' Tony closed his eyes and remembered the kiss. 'And perhaps there will be other opportunities. I must see her again, in any case, to settle the business with Barton and to make sure she is all right.'

He remembered the missing ornaments and the empty jewel box. 'Stanton is wrong. I am sure of it. He told me she was Barton's mistress. But if Barton is keeping her, he is doing it on the cheap. If she were mine, her jewel box would be full to overflowing.'

If she were mine…

'But it is almost empty. And there is evidence that she is selling off the furnishings of the house to make ends meet. I had assumed that that old ninny Wellford would make provision for her after his death. Surely he did not think taking a young wife would somehow extend his own time on this mortal coil. He must have known she'd outlive him.'

He sat in his favourite armchair and stared into the fire. 'She is putting up a brave front, Patrick, but things are not right, above stairs. The least I can do, as an old friend of the family, is see to it that she comes through this safely.'

Patrick snorted, and poured him his brandy. 'What utter nonsense. Yes, that is the least you could do. And I do not see why you feel it necessary to pretend that you wish to do as little as possible. It astounds me that someone who has no trouble taking things which do not belong to him balks when there is a chance to take the thing he most wants.'

Tony took the proffered glass and gestured with it. 'She is not some inanimate object, Patrick. I cannot just go and take her. She has a say in the matter.'

Patrick shook his head, giving his master up as hopeless, and, totally forgetting his station, poured a brandy for himself. 'Not the woman, sir. Happiness. You are so accustomed to thinking in

terms of what you might do for others that you forget to do what might be in your own best interests. By all means, empty your purse and risk your fool neck helping the woman, if it pleases you to do so.

'But when the moment comes to collect a reward for it, do not stand upon your honour and deny yourself what pleasure you can gain from the moment. Do not think twice about your inability to rival her late husband in rank or pocketbook. If, in the end, the woman cares only for those, you must admit you have been wrong about her, and the girl you loved no longer exists. No matter how beautiful she may be, if she is a fortune hunter, then she is not worth saving and you are best off to forget her.'

Chapter Four

Constance sat in her morning room, paging through the small stack of receipts in front of her. It was ever so much more satisfying than the stack of overdue bills that had been there just a few days before. She was a long way from safe. But neither was she standing on the edge of financial disaster, staring down into total ruin.

She would need to visit the new duke, to remind him of his promised allowance, which would cover the incoming bills. And while there, she could retrieve the deed. With that in hand, she might secure a loan against the house, or arrange its sale. With money of her own in her pocket, she might protect herself against the vagaries of Freddy's payments for many months to come. For the first time in ages, she felt the stirrings of hope for the future, and cautious optimism.

And her salvation had come from a strange source, indeed. She offered a silent prayer of thanks for the timely intervention of the thief, whoever he might be, and hoped that the loss of his little bag had not forced him to do other crimes. She would hate to think herself the cause of misfortune in others, or the further ruination of the man that had climbed out of her window.

But, somehow, she suspected it was not the case. Perhaps she was romanticising a criminal, and most foolish for it. She might be creating a Robin Hood out of a common scoundrel. But the situation had been so fortuitous, it almost seemed that he had meant to leave the money behind for her use.

It was a ludicrous notion. What reason would he have had to help her? But he had offered, had he not? And if he had not meant to leave it, he must have missed the bag by now. Surely he would have returned to take it from her? After she was sure he was gone, she had gathered the money back into the sack, and placed it under her pillow. And then she had lain awake in dread most of the night, convinced that at any moment, she would feel a breeze at the window and hear a light step on the carpet, approaching her bed in the darkness…

And at last she had forced herself to admit that it was not dread she was feeling at the reappearance of the strange man. The idea that he would return and she might open her eyes to find him bending over her bed and reaching to touch her, held no terror, just a rush of passionate emotion fuelled by the memory of a stolen kiss.

Which was utterly ridiculous. It had been a very nice kiss. And best to leave it at that. He was a thief, and she would be a fool to trust him with her heart or her reputation, despite what he had said to her the previous night.

And even if he were a gentleman, as he claimed, what could they possibly have in common other than a single moment of weakness? Could she have a conversation with him, in the light of day? Would he even wish to see her? He had said something about being in love. Did he care for her at all? Kisses meant very little to most men. He had probably forgotten it already.

But it had been a most extraordinary kiss.

Her mind had circled back again, to replay the kiss, as it seemed to do whenever she tried to talk herself out of the fantasy. She was fast creating a paragon out of nothing. A man both dashing and kind, but more than a bit of a rogue. When the candles were lit, he would be passably good-looking, and as innocuous in appearance and behaviour as he had claimed. But at night, he was a burglar, living off his wits. And a single kiss from her would make him forsake all others and risk capture by returning to her rooms.

She closed her eyes and smiled, imagining his arms about her again. He would confess that he was unable to resist the attraction, and assure her that, if she could find it in her heart to forgive his criminal misdeeds, he would love and cherish her 'til the end of her days.

'Your Grace, there is a gentleman here to see you.'

Susan was standing in the door, hesitating to interrupt. And for a moment, Constance thought that her dream had come to life. She looked enquiringly to her maid.

'Lord Barton.'

Damn.

'Tell him I am not at home, Susan.'

'He is most insistent, your Grace.'

'As am I. I am not now, nor ever shall be, at home to Lord Barton.'

'I thought you might say that.' The voice came from the hall, just beyond Susan's head. 'So I took the liberty of letting myself in. I hope you don't mind.' Jack Barton's tone made it clear that he didn't care one way or the other whether she minded—he intended to do as he pleased in the matter.

Constance swept the papers she'd been holding under the desk blotter to hide them, and stood to face him.

'I mind very much, Lord Barton.'

'I believe I requested, when last we talked, that you call me Jack.' He was smiling, as though he had totally forgotten her response to their last conversation.

'And then you insulted me.'

'I meant the offer as a compliment, your Grace. I do not make it lightly, nor do I make such generous offers to all the women of my acquaintance.'

'You suggested that I become your mistress,' she reminded him, coldly.

'Because I wish to surround myself with beauty, and can afford to do so. You are quite the most beautiful woman I have ever seen, and I mean to have you.'

'I am not some item, to be added to your collection,' she replied. 'You are mistaken, if you think you can purchase a woman as easily as a painting.'

He was unaffected by her answer. 'I have not been so in the past. For the most part, it is only a matter of finding the correct price. Once you do, you can purchase anything.'

'Let me make myself clear: you cannot buy me, Lord Barton. No amount of money would induce me to submit to you. Now, get out of my house.' She pointed towards the door.

'No.'

This presented a problem. She could not put him out herself, and such male servants as she had were either too young or too old to do the job for her. To a gentleman, her demand that he leave should have been enough. But if she was forced to rely on Barton's honour as a gentleman, she was left with nothing at all to defend herself. 'Very well, then,' she said, resigned. 'State your business and then be gone.'

He smiled and took a seat in the chair near her desk, as though he were a welcome guest. 'I expected you would see it my way, once you had thought about it. I came about the ball I am hosting, tomorrow evening.'

'I sent regrets.'

'Yes, you did. You are the picture of courtesy, if a trifle stubborn. I must break you of that, if we are to manage well together.'

'Do not think you need to manage me, Lord Barton,' she snapped back at him. 'I thought I made it clear, when I refused your contemptible offer, that we would not be doing anything further together. I do not wish to dance with you. I doubt I can eat in your presence, since the thought of you sickens me. And thus, I sent regrets for your ball.'

Her word seemed to have no effect on his continued good humour. He was still smiling as he said, 'That is not acceptable.'

'It is most acceptable to me,' she insisted. 'And that is all that matters. I doubt that you have any tender feelings that I might have offended. I do not believe you capable of them.'

'Let me speak plainly,' he said.

'I have been unable to stop you.'

'You will be in attendance at the ball, because I wish it to be so.'

'And why would I care what you wish?'

Without another word, he reached into his pocket, and withdrew an object, wrapped in a linen handkerchief. His eyes widened and his mouth made an 'Oh', like a conjuror performing a trick. Then he dipped his fingers into the bundle and withdrew a ruby-and-diamond necklace. He dangled it in front of her.

And without thinking, she reached for it, and cursed her hand for acting faster than her wits.

'I knew you would not be bribed with pretty words or baubles like a sensible woman, since I've tried that and failed. But then I thought, perhaps I was using the wrong bait.'

She watched the necklace, glittering in his hand, and tried to conceal her desire for it.

'You were most foolish to sell the whole thing. You needn't have made a complete copy you know. Just pried out the stones and let the jeweller fit paste ones into the old setting.'

She had learned that herself, after selling the rubies. The cost of even the cheapest copy ate almost all of the additional profit from selling the gold setting.

She said nothing.

He turned the necklace to let the jewels sparkle in the sunlight. 'And you made the copy, once you realised that the necklace was not technically yours, did you not? It is part of your husband's entail. It belongs to the new duke, and not to you. It was very wrong of you to sell it. What do you suppose the new duke would say, if he knew you were selling a necklace that has been in his family for generations?'

The new duke would likely go many months before noticing its absence. When he did, she'd hoped to stall him with the copy until she could afford to buy back the real necklace. But she kept her foolish mouth shut over the secret since Barton had enough power over her without her full confession.

'I trust you have seen the error of your ways, and do not wish to continue stealing from your nephew.'

She thought to argue that it was not really stealing, if one was only trying to get money that one was owed, and continued to hold silent.

He nodded as though she had spoken. 'Fortunately for you, I am an understanding man. I will give you back your necklace. Once you have done something for me.'

She closed her eyes. Now she must decide. Lie with Barton, or let him go to Freddy with the necklace. The choice was easy. Let him tell Freddy the truth. Perhaps it would move the duke to loosen his purse strings.

When she opened her eyes again, Barton was watching her with amusement. 'You are not asking what it is I wish.'

'I know what it is that you want. The answer is still no.'

He laughed. 'You think I demand unconditional surrender, for a single strand of rubies? While it is a lovely necklace, I suspect you hold your honour to be worth more. A price above rubies, perhaps?' He laughed. 'Listen carefully to my offer, and then give me your answer.

'First, what will happen to you, if you deny me: I will let the necklace fall from my pocket somewhere public. Everyone knows it is yours. Someone will ask me how I came by it. I will explain how you left it in my rooms. The world will draw its own conclusions, and you will be ruined.

'Or you can attend the ball tomorrow. You will stand beside me as hostess, and dance with me as I wish. At the end of the evening, I will return the jewels to you, and you may go home.'

'And if I stand up with you, the world will draw much the same conclusions that they did, if I do not obey you,' she said.

'They might wonder, but they will not be sure.'

She weighed the possibilities. The ruby necklace was clear proof of her perfidy. If she could retrieve it without much cost to her honour, it would be worth the attempt. Of course, there was a chance that he would deny her.

He saw the suspicion in her eyes. 'You needn't fear. I swear that you shall have the thing back before the clock strikes twelve. And I do not expect physical intimacy. Not yet, at any rate. But if

you think you can toy with me, or trick me in some way, the price for the necklace may be much higher the next time I offer it.'

What was she to do? It was not really such a great sacrifice to go to a ball. Although she hated Barton, it would do her reputation no real harm. 'Very well. I will attend.'

He laughed, again. It was a cold sound, short and brittle like cracking ice. 'Excellent. I shall have the pleasure of your company, and you shall have your necklace.'

He leaned closer, the laughter gone from his voice. 'And you will have learned a valuable lesson. When things go my way, I am happy and reward those around me. Rewards are so much better than punishment, are they not? I find that training a woman is not much different than training a hound. It all begins with the smallest act of obedience. Once a man has achieved that, he is well on the road to becoming a master.' There was a half-smile of satisfaction on his face, as though his eventual victory was a foregone conclusion.

'You will find, Lord Barton, that I am not some lapdog to be easily brought to heel. You have won in this. But that is all. Now, if you will excuse me, I must prepare for your ball tomorrow. I wish to look my best, so that you may remember me well, for it will be the last time that you see me. If you please.' She gestured to the door.

He rose, indolently, and proceeded out of the room, leaving the air around her bitterly cold.

Constance waited in the drawing room of the London townhouse of the current Duke of Wellford. She had no right to feel the wave of possessiveness that she was feeling towards the house and its contents.

It did not belong to her, after all. It had been her husband's home long before she married him, but never truly hers. She had seen to the care and cleaning of it, of course. She had entertained guests in this very room. She had chosen the furnishings, and the food. She had hired and fired the servants.

And now, after twelve years in residence, and only a year away, she was a visitor. The butler who had greeted her was not familiar. When crossing the entrance hall, she caught sight of a footman she had hired herself. He had almost smiled when he'd seen her. Almost. And then there had been a flash of pity, before he went back to his duties, and treated her with the excessive formality due a ranking guest, and not a member of the family.

And to add to the discomfort, Freddy left her to wait. She had informed him that morning that she'd planned to visit, but when she arrived he was not in attendance, having decided to go riding in Hyde Park with his friends.

Robert had often railed against the folly of keeping horses in town. To keep the beasts fed, groomed and stabled was disproportionately expensive, when compared to the amount of time he had to ride while residing in the city. Apparently, the new duke had no such concerns.

Constance drummed her fingers against the small gilt table beside the settee, then folded her hands in her lap, willing them to be still. It was best to marshal her patience before Freddy arrived, if she wished to greet him pleasantly and keep him in good humour. She would make no ground in securing money or deed if she angered him by censuring his behaviour.

Especially if she must admit to him that she'd pawned the family jewels to pay the butcher's bill. He would see such behaviour as a weakness in her own character, and not his own for denying her funds and leaving her in need. She had learned from past discussions that, although Freddy was nearly useless at his best, if she angered him or questioned his judgement he could be even worse.

She had refused a servant's offer of refreshment for the third time before Freddy deigned to grace her with his presence, still in his riding coat. The smell of horses followed him into the room, and she noticed, with distaste, that there was mud from the stable still on his boot. He was tracking it on the Aubusson.

Not her Aubusson, she reminded herself. And not her problem. Someone would clean it. It did not matter.

'Aunt Constance, to what do I owe the pleasure?' There was a moment's awkwardness as he greeted her, and remembered that he was her better, and not a guest in her house.

'I wish it were only for pleasure that I am visiting, your Grace.' She rose to greet him, dropping a respectful curtsy.

'Please, Constance. Call me Freddy.' There was still the touch of a little boy's pleading as he said it. 'You can, you know. I want you to treat this as though it were your home. It can be your home in truth, if you wish. Lord knows, I could use a woman with a level head to run the household for me.'

And how could she tell him that she could not bear to? The memories of Robert were still fresh in her mind. The knowledge that the servants were no longer hers to command, and that she could, and should be, displaced when Freddy took a wife of his own—she tried not to shudder at the thought.

'You know I must not, Freddy. It is no longer my place. It would be far better were you to find a wife to take the house in hand.'

He scoffed. 'Settle down so soon? Surely there is time for that later. I am just learning to enjoy the advantages of the title. A wife would spoil it all.'

She dreaded to think what advantages he had discovered that would be so hindered by a wife. 'It is your duty, you know,' she reminded, as gently as possible.

Freddy shook his head like a stubborn child. 'All you ever talk of is duty, Aunt Constance. There is more to life than doing one's duty.'

'Duty is much a part of your position, Freddy. You have a responsibility to your King, to your tenants, to your servants.' She hoped that the responsibility to herself was implied, and that he would not make her beg for her allowance.

'Well, yes. I suppose. But Parliament is not currently in session. So there is one thing I needn't worry about. And the tenants take care of themselves, for the most part.'

She resisted the urge to point out that they never seemed to manage it, when her husband was alive. 'But there is still the matter of the collecting of rents, and the paying of bills, and making sure that all your financial obligations are met.' And there was a broad enough hint, if he cared to take it.

'But it is a tiresome business to worry over every little detail, when the sun is shining and one is aching for a gallop.' Although Freddy's dirty boots had come home, his mind was still on horseback in the park.

'An estate manager, or man of business, can take care of such things. It would leave you with less to worry about.'

'But, Aunt Constance, I am not worried now.' As Freddy smiled, it was evident that her financial problems had in no way touched him. 'And being duke is not so hard as all that, I'm sure. With a little practice, I can manage the estates on my own, just as Uncle Robert did.'

Constance fought the urge to inform Freddy how distant his abilities were from those of his uncle. She took a deep breath, and tried a different way. 'I am sure you are right, Freddy. Once you have held the title for a while, you will have everything set to rights. But I must admit, right now, that I was rather hoping we could deal with the part of the estate that concerns my allowance. It worries me greatly, that I have not received this month's cheque, and in the past, the amount—' she took another breath and rushed through the next words '—has not been sufficient to cover expenses.'

'You know,' said Freddy, as though the thought had just occurred to him, 'that if you were to live in the dower house of the manor, your expenses would not be so very great.'

'They are not great now, I assure you. I have made what economies I can.' A year of mutton instead of lamb, and no shopping, and cuts in staff had done nothing to make the income match the outflow.

'But really, Aunt Constance. Be sensible. If you were to leave London and return to the country, I need not give you any allowance at all.' He was smiling as though he had found the perfect solution.

'That is not technically true, Freddy,' she said. 'I still must eat. And pay my maid. And there are dresses to buy, carriages to hire, small entertainments…The only way you will be free of the expense of me is when I remarry and my upkeep falls upon my husband.'

He stared at her as though the idea had never occurred to him. 'Surely you do not mean to remarry so soon, Aunt Constance.'

'On the contrary, Freddy, I find it a most respectable choice. I am sure that Robert would have had no problem with it. He said as much to me, when he was alive. And he always meant me to set up housekeeping in town, in hopes that I might meet someone suitable, and not be too much alone. For that reason, he deeded me the house in Grosvenor Square. Speaking of which…' she eased the conversation towards her next request '…if possible, I would like to take the deed away with me today, to give to my bankers.'

Freddy's brow furrowed. 'I never saw the logic in Uncle Robert's deeding the house to you, Aunt Constance. It is too much responsibility for a woman, in my opinion. As I told you before, you are welcome here, or in the dower house, in Sussex. It is very nice.'

She had to hide her annoyance before continuing. 'I have no doubt it is a nice house, Freddy. I decorated it myself, for Robert's mother. And I have no problem staying in it. When I visit,' she said, slowly and clearly. 'But I have no wish to move back to Sussex. Robert meant for me to be out in London, after he died, mixing freely with society.'

'But why must it be London? Society in the country was quite good enough for you before.'

'Although the country life is most pleasant, I know the gentlemen in the neighbourhood, and can assure you there is no one to suit me, in regards to matrimony. I am not likely to meet a husband if I cloister myself in the dower house.'

'If you are there, where I can keep an eye on you, I can advise you, if and when it comes to the matter of your marriage.'

If and when she married? 'Freddy,' she said, struggling to maintain her temper, 'I am not a child that needs advice in this matter. I am a full six years older than you, and will know a good match when I see it. I do not need your advice, or your permission.'

'But you do need my money,' he pointed out, petulantly.

'Not for so very much longer, I hope. I am endeavouring to be out of your hair and your pocketbook with as much expedience as I can manage. But you need to help me in this, Freddy.' She softened. 'Please. If you will give me my allowance, I can pay my bills and will not bother you again for quite some time. Perhaps never. If you give me the deed, I can dispense with the house, and move to simpler accommodations. It will mean less expense for both of us.'

Freddy looked uncomfortable. 'The deed is fine where it is. I really do not see the need to bother you with the care of it.'

'Oh, it is no bother, Freddy,' she assured him. 'It makes sense, does it not, to keep it with the rest of my papers? And it will be one less thing you need to keep track of.'

His eyes darted around the room, as though looking for some excuse to escape the conversation. 'I mean…really, Constance, you cannot expect me to lay hands on the thing, on such short notice.'

'Freddy, it is not short notice at all. I have asked you for it for the better part of a year. Please can you not go into the study and bring it to me? Then I will be gone and you need not hear me ask again.'

'Well, the truth is, Constance…' Freddy looked more than uncomfortable, now, and had to struggle to meet her gaze '…the truth is, I have lost it.'

'Do not be ridiculous, Freddy. I know it lies in the safe, in my husband's—I mean, in your study. You could get it for me now, if you wished.'

'Constance, you do not understand.'

'Clearly I don't, Freddy. Let us go to the study, now. I will show you where it is.'

His voice was lower, almost hard to hear, and he was looking at the ground. 'It is no longer in the safe, Constance. As I told you, I lost it.'

‘Well, then let us go and search for it. It is probably among the papers in your desk.’ She could not resist a reproof. ‘Although it might have been wiser to never have removed it from the safe. It would have saved the bother now.’

‘At cards, Constance.’ He said it loud and looked her straight in the eye. ‘It is not on the desk, or anywhere else in the house. I lost it at cards. I was in my cups, and in deep play. And I am a little short of cash, until the next rents are collected.’

‘And so you paid your debt with a thing that does not belong to you.’ She looked at him in horror, as she realised just how bad things had become.

She no longer bothered to contain her temper. ‘I come here at my wits’ end, without a penny in my pocket, and you berate me for the high price of my keeping. You tell me I only want your money. As I see it, Freddy, I do not need your money nearly so much as you needed mine. You took the only thing I had that truly belonged to me and you gambled it away. And you did it because you are too busy drinking and gaming and whoring to be bothered to collect the rents on your properties, which you need to do to keep the coffers full. And now you think you can force me back to the country to play housekeeper to you, while you destroy everything my husband worked so hard to build.’

‘I am the duke now,’ he shouted back, although he sounded more like a spoiled child than a peer of the realm. ‘Not your husband. I do not have to take advice or listen to you criticise my methods. I can do as I please.’

‘Then you do not understand what it means to be a duke. Not a good one, at any rate,’ she snapped.

‘Good or bad, Aunt Constance, it would serve you to do as I say, for I am head of your family now. Uncle Robert was a fool to give you as much freedom as he did, for you seem to think that you can do just as you please, and answer to no one. I am glad that the deed is gone, and I no longer need hear you whine for it. It is time that this stupidity of maintaining an expensive residence in London is brought to a halt, and you are brought to your senses.

‘And with regard to your allowance—you will have no more money from me, not another groat, until you come to your senses and move to the dower house at Wellford, where you belong.’

Chapter Five

At the door of the ballroom in Barton's home, Constance greeted her guests with a frozen smile. If she could manage to control nothing else around her, she could at least control her temper for the few hours necessary to earn back her necklace.

She had pleaded with Freddy to see reason, and he had all but thrown her from his house. He would not even tell her who held the deed to her own home, and she was left to wait for a knock at the door, politely explaining that she must pay rent or vacate the premises.

And tonight she must dance to Barton's tune, if only to retrieve the necklace and sell the stones again. The rubies would mean another month's income, perhaps two. Or even more if she was forced to reduce her staff and move to a smaller place.

But it did no good to think about what might come, if there was a more immediate problem to deal with. Until she had the rubies in hand, she must keep a tight rein on her emotions, and give Barton what he wanted. To that end, she made sure that she looked her best, and was ready when the carriage he'd sent for her arrived. Her gown was not new, but she had not worn it in over a year. Susan had retrimmed the deep blue satin with silver lace, and dressed her dark hair with silver ribbons.

Constance was afraid to wear the necklace that best suited the gown lest someone recognise the sapphires as paste, and settled for the pearls. And she made sure that there was enough empty space in her reticule to carry away the rubies, should Barton be true to his word and return them to her.

Of course, if he did not, she would feel most foolish for being rooked into attending the evening's affair. But it would be a small loss, and the trick would not work twice. If she did not have the rubies at the end of the evening, she would reconcile herself to whatever might result from Barton's revelation.

But at the moment she was trapped in the receiving line next to a man she detested, and forced to entertain his guests as if they were her own. She smiled politely at the man bent over her hand, smiled at his wife as well, and responded to their greetings by rote, as she had to hundreds of guests at parties she had thrown for Robert. Her smile brightened as she noticed them to be strangers. Barton was not privy to the first circle of the ton. Many of her closest friends recognised the man for what he was and declined the invitation, or cut him outright. Constance wholeheartedly regretted that she had been slow to see his true character, but she was not alone, for the ballroom was full of people willing to befriend him.

She looked past the next man in line, barely hearing Barton's introduction of him, and scanned the crowd. Of course, a fair portion of the guests were social climbers, cits and hangers-on. But after this evening, she need never see them again, and they certainly would not be in a position to go gossiping to her friends about seeing her here.

'Mr Smythe, the Dowager Duchess of Wellford.' She winced. Barton insisted on using her title to his friends, as though he wished to make sure that everyone knew the value of his new possession.

The man before her bowed low over her hand. 'Your Grace.'

Although his face was unfamiliar, his voice struck a chord of memory. There was laughter in it. And the touch of his hand on hers was at the same time, ordinary and intimately familiar.

It was the thief from her bedroom.

He rose from his bow and looked into her eyes for a fraction of a second too long, as though daring her to speak and knowing she could not. His eyes were hazel and sparkling from the shared conspiracy, his smile was broad and a trifle too intense for a common introduction. If it were another man, she might think he had arrived half-foxed and up to mischief. But this man had already proven to be more than he appeared. If he meant to cause trouble, she doubted he would blame an excess of wine.

'Mr Smythe?' That was what Barton had said, had he not? She could not very well ask him to repeat himself, or demand to know how he knew Smythe. To express too much interest in a male guest was not the quickest way back to her necklace.

Of course, she could wipe the familiar grin from Smythe's face, and prove to him that she recognised him. A casual word could ruin him just as quickly as it could her. She opened her mouth.

And perhaps he would ask about the money she'd stolen from him or the kiss he'd stolen in her bedroom.

She closed her mouth again, and pasted on a delighted smile. 'How do you do, Mr Smythe.'

'Quite well, thank you.' She could swear he winked at her.

And then, he was gone.

If Barton had noticed anything pass between them, he said nothing. And soon the guests were through the line and Barton led her out in the first dance of the evening.

She moved through the patterns as if sleepwalking, speaking to her partner only when she could not avoid it. He danced with her several more times, when she could not manage to dodge his attention, and she maintained the same demeanour: polite, cordial and distant. Nothing that might make the guests assume there was anything of a more intimate nature likely to happen between them in the future.

And while she held Barton at a distance, she also managed to avoid contact with the curious Mr Smythe. It was possible that she had imagined recognising him. Perhaps she had been wrong. She could not very well ask him about it in a crowded ballroom.

But she was sure she was not mistaken. He was the thief. She had seen the recognition in his eyes. And she was somewhat frustrated to realise that it was not to be the least like she had fantasised, with him carrying some burning desire to see her again. She thought she could feel him, observing her from across the room, but this might be her imagination as well. He made no attempt to contact her; when she looked in his direction, he was always looking elsewhere. He seemed to care very little that she was in the room at all.

She was relieved when it finally came time for supper. Barton led her into the dining room, and her position as hostess meant that she was seated at the far end of the table from him. But nowhere near Smythe, either. The people around her were unexceptional, and she relaxed for a time, chatting amiably with them before the meal ended and she had to gather her wits and return to the dance floor.

When she reached the ballroom, she took care to get lost in the crowd and separated from her host. The next dance was a waltz, far more intimate than she liked, if she should have to dance with Barton. If she could find another partner quickly, it would be several minutes before she need speak with him again. She searched the room. Quickly, someone. Anyone.

'Your Grace, may I have this dance?'

She'd said yes to the man before even turning to face him. And when she looked up, it was into the smiling eyes of Mr Smythe.

He saw her discomposure and said nothing, taking her hand and leading her out on to the floor.

As the music began, any doubt that he was the man from her bedroom disappeared. He held her as he had held her that night, in a grasp that managed to be both relaxed and intimate. It felt good to be in his arms again, and to be able to admire him in the candlelight.

And there was much about him that was admirable. His hair was brown, and had an appealing softness to it. She remembered how it had felt when she'd touched it, and wanted to touch it again. He had pleasant, even features, and the smile on his lips gave every indication of breaking into a grin, given the slightest provocation. His eyes were bright with suppressed mirth. If his profession left him racked with guilt, there was no indication of it, for he seemed a most happy fellow.

They danced in silence, until at last he leaned a trifle closer and whispered, 'How long do you suppose we can pretend a lack of recognition to each other? We have managed quite well so far, I think. Longer than I expected. But one of us has to break eventually. I surrender. You have won.'

'I don't know what you are talking about.'

'And now you are taking the game to extra innings. Not necessary. I am conquered. Vanquished. You nearly had me in the receiving line, you know. Finding you there, next to Barton, was a nasty surprise.'

'You will survive it,' she responded tartly. 'Seeing an acquaintance unexpectedly in a public place is not nearly so shocking as finding a total stranger in one's private rooms.'

'Touché. But I had hoped you had forgiven me for that. Why so cold to me now?'

'Perhaps I don't approve of people who take things that don't belong to them.'

'Oh, really? But I notice, when you were in need, that you had no problem keeping the money I left for you.'

So he had left it for her. But did he expect thanks for involving her in a theft? 'That was different. What else was I to do with it? I had no idea—'

'Where to find me and who the money belonged to. And you were in desperate need, so you took it. Believe me, I understand completely.'

'I will pay you back when I am able,' she said.

'You will pay me back tonight,' he replied.

Her heart sank. He had seemed so nice. And he had promised not to compromise her. Now he would become just another man with a hold over her, and he would use it to his advantage like all the rest. She stumbled as they turned.

He caught her, incorporating the misstep gracefully into the movement of the dance. 'Oh, do not give me that melodramatic look. We are in a ballroom, not Drury Lane. I have no intention of asking you to whore yourself to me. I merely need you to keep your lover, Barton, occupied while I go to search his study.'

'He is not my lover,' she retorted.

'Really? But you stand as hostess, at his side.'

'It was not my desire to do so.'

'And you have been seen often in his company.'

'For a time,' she corrected, 'but no more after tonight. He is nothing singular. I have been seen in the company of many men.'

His eyebrow arched suggestively.

'I am in your company now. But that does not mean I would invite you to my bed.'

Of course, if he wished to be there, he would hardly require an invitation. She would be quite helpless to stop him, and perhaps next time he would wish to steal more than a kiss. Once the thought was formed, it showed no intention of fading.

He was staring at her again, noticing the gap in the conversation. And his smile was definitely a grin. She wished she had not mentioned the bed at all, for if he did not have the idea before, he must surely be thinking of it now.

She cleared her throat. 'What I meant to say was, I hope to marry again, and that means I am likely to be seen in the company of gentleman who I think might be of a mind to take a wife.'

'And you chose Barton as a possible husband?' Smythe's tone was incredulous and the smile disappeared from his face.

'I sometimes find that the interests of gentlemen are less than worthy. It is a tribute to my naïveté and not my lowered standards.'

'So you and Barton are not…?' He spoke a trifle too hastily and his hand tightened on her waist.

'He made an offer that had nothing to do with matrimony, and I gave him a set-down. More than once.' She frowned. 'At the end of the evening I will probably have to give him another, since he ignored the others. And he tricked me into coming here, for reasons I'd rather not discuss.'

He blinked down at her and his hand relaxed. He was holding her in the same loose grip as before, as though he was confident that she would stay with him, even if he had no hold on her. 'Well, then. Perhaps I was misinformed.'

'Most definitely you were.'

He looked bemused. 'Then I hope you will not think it too rude when I will ask you to keep the man who is not your lover, though he seems to think he will be, occupied while I pay an unaccompanied visit to his study.'

'And how do you expect me to do that?'

'Use your imagination. A quarter of an hour is all I need and easily worth the hundred guineas I left in your room.'

The dance came to an end and he led her from the floor. 'Your Grace, it was an unexpected pleasure. Now, if you will excuse me?' There was the slightest inclination of his head, which seemed to hint that he had business to attend to, and that the clock was ticking.

She glanced across the room, and somewhere in the distance a clock chimed the three-quarter hour. Very well, then. She would give him fifteen minutes. It was a small price for the money he had given her. She glanced around the room, searching for Barton, and saw him too close to the stairs that must lead to the study. 'My lord?' She had hoped to ask him to dance, and out of the corner of her eye, noticed that the orchestra had chosen that inopportune moment to take refreshment. Very well, then. It was near enough the end of the evening. Now was as good a time as any to retrieve the necklace. 'If I might speak to you?'

'Certainly, my dear.' He bowed low over her hand. 'What is it?'

She resisted the urge to inform him that she was not now, nor ever wished to be, his dear. 'In private.'

'My study, then.' He turned to lead her to the exact place that she did not wish to be.

'Not so private as all that, I think. The garden, perhaps? It is quiet enough there.'

'And most romantic in the moonlight.'

She bit back another retort. There would be time enough in fifteen minutes to set him straight.

He took her hand and led her to the balcony doors, and, at the back of her mind, she felt a minute pass. And another, as he led her outside, and down the stone steps to the garden. When they were in the darkness and a distance from the house, he turned to her and smiled. 'To what do I owe this sudden desire to be alone with me? Have you reconsidered my offer?'

'You know very well the reason. Have I performed to your satisfaction in this little farce?'

'Most admirably. We can make it a regular occurrence, if you wish.'

'But I do not wish,' she said firmly. 'I have told you over and over again.'

'And yet, you agreed to do it tonight. And it was a delightful evening. Not so terrible as you made it out to be, I'm sure.'

'There was only one reason I agreed to come, and you know it full well.'

'Ah, the necklace.' He reached into his pocket, and produced the rubies, holding them in front of her.

She snatched the thing from his hand and secreted it in her reticule, turning to go back to the house, no longer caring about Smythe and his fifteen minutes.

Barton's fingers closed on her upper arm, holding her in place. She attempted to pull away, and he tightened his grip, ever so slightly. To struggle further might leave bruises on her skin. She imagined the shame of going back into the ballroom, the red marks of a man's fingers already blossoming on her arm.

She stayed still.

'Willing to stay with me, after all?'

'I do not wish my behaviour to create gossip.'

He smiled, realising that he'd won again. 'And why would a rumour frighten you? If I am in the wrong, and you do not wish to be with me, then surely you could appeal to one of the many gentlemen of your acquaintance for assistance?' He snapped his fingers. 'But that is right. Many of the gentlemen here have received set-downs from you, have they not? They are likely to be more sympathetic to my plight. Over and over again, you allow men to lead you to the fence, and then you do not jump.'

'That is not the way it has been at all,' she argued. 'I had no idea that the gentlemen in question did not intend marriage. Or you, for that matter. I never sought anything less.'

Barton smiled. 'How refreshingly naïve you are. I think it is the combination of experience and naïveté that attracts me to you. You believe it is possible to go back to the way things were, before you married, and to have a second chance at a husband and a family. But you will never again be that young and innocent. When men look at you, they know that you are too old to guarantee a first child, but fully ripe for all the pleasures that a man might wish to experience with a woman. When we look at you, my dear, we know that you know precisely what will happen when you are alone with us.'

He smiled and drew closer. 'I can see it, even now. The lust sizzles in your eyes. You fear scandal, more than you fear my touch. I can steal a kiss, perhaps a caress in the darkness. These things do not alarm you so much as the thought that someone might catch us at it. I suspect that you would have no problem giving yourself freely, if you could be assured of the discretion of your partner. Take this instance. If you do not submit, you must walk away from me, and I have but to call out and draw attention to the fact that you are with me, or squeeze your arm, ever so slightly.' He tightened his grip, and then relaxed it again, as he felt her submit. 'Then people will notice that we were alone together, and there will be even more talk than there already is.'

'People will think you a brute for forcing yourself on a woman.'

'Since the woman is yourself, and you just spent the evening at my side as hostess, I doubt that anyone will assume force. It is far more likely that they will assume you were a willing participant in anything that might have occurred. The assumptions of a curious society will be confirmed, the minute you complain. Or you can allow me to kiss you, here in the dark, and we can return to the ballroom separately. No one will be the wiser.'

Damn her for her foolishness in thinking she could win against Barton in his own house. She had gained the necklace, only to lose more ground. And damn Mr Smythe for using her as well. He had been gone more than fifteen minutes, she was sure of it. And he thought nothing of leaving her in the clutches of Barton. Now that Smythe had what he wanted, he had forgotten her.

It would do no good to fight Barton now. If she gave in, perhaps the incident would pass quickly, and she might escape. She closed her eyes and tipped her head up to meet him as he leaned in and kissed her.

And she did nothing to stop him, because he was right. The last thing she needed was more gossip. When he wished for her to open her mouth, she did that as well. She could but hope that he would not take things too far in so public a place. And after tonight, scandal or no, she would not be alone with him again.

He was doing his best to arouse feelings in her, and she took great pleasure in ignoring the attempt. If he wished to make love to her, then let him. But eventually, when she did not respond, he would lose interest and let her go. In the meantime, she would see to it that the experience was not so pleasurable as he imagined.

He was working industriously on her mouth, and his hands were on her shoulders. It was only a matter of time before they strayed lower.

She was disappointed to find that she felt neither desire nor outrage at the fact. Her mind felt strangely detached from her body, uninterested in the proceedings and wishing only to go home and put the experience behind her. Let him do what he wished and be done with it. It had been so long since she'd felt anything at all, she doubted that Barton could move her with his fumblings.

As though he'd heard her thoughts, Barton's hand began a slow descent towards the swell of her breast.

And then he pulled away from her with an oath. There was the sound of someone crashing clumsily through the ornamental shrubbery, soft, tuneless whistling growing louder as the intruder approached.

Barton took off in the direction of the sound. 'Here, you. What do you think you're doing?'

'Trying to find my way out of this damn briar patch.'

Constance strangled a laugh. It was Mr Smythe, making it clear to all within earshot that he was done with whatever business he'd been up to.

'I only wanted a breath of air. Two steps from the house and I was lost in the wilderness. I've a good mind to complain to the host.'

'I am the host, you drunken idiot. And you're stepping on my rose-bushes.' Jack was furious.

Constance stepped off the path and disappeared into the darkness, leaning against a tree and giving way to silent giggles.

There was a pause as an apparently drunken Smythe took stock of the situation. 'Roses? So I am. Oh, well. No harm done. The spindly little things were half-dead, anyway. Could have used more water.'

'They are in perfect health. And they are imported from France.'

'Well, that's your problem. Get yourself some proper English flowers. Just as pretty and not so delicate.'

'Get off of my yard, you drunken buffoon! I invited you here, Smythe, on the recommendation of a friend. I can see I was mistaken in the courtesy and it will not be repeated. Kindly take yourself from the premises, before I have you forcibly removed.'

'I was going. Going. Know where I'm not wanted.' She could hear more crashing, as Smythe wandered noisily away in the direction of the street, trampling more expensive landscaping as he went.

There was more swearing from Barton as he came back in her direction, and softly called her name.

She stepped behind a tree, scarcely daring to breathe.

He walked within an arm's length of her, but she stayed still in the shadows and let him pass.

Barton released another quiet oath, and turned in the direction of the house, probably hoping to find her there.

She smiled in satisfaction. Let him look. She had the necklace again. There was no reason to stay a moment longer. It was not a chill night, she had no wrap. She could find her own way to the street through the garden, without taking leave of the host.

She turned into the darkness. At least she thought she could find her way to the street. If the house was behind her, then surely…

'Allow me.' A hand reached out of the darkness, and caught her arm.

She gasped. 'Smythe.'

'The same.'

'I thought you had gone.'

'And leave you alone in the dark? I think not. Do you have a carriage back at the house?'

'Barton sent a coach for me. I assumed that I would find a friend to escort me home.'

'And so you have. I will see you home, if you can leave immediately. I suspect I am no longer welcome in Barton's home.' She could see his grin in the darkness.

She smiled in return. 'And I have no wish to return. It suits me well.'

'Excellent.' It was impossible to tell, but he sounded sincerely pleased to have her company. He slipped his arm through hers and lead her in the direction of the street.

A thrill shot through her at the idea of being alone in the dark with him again, far from the safety of the house. Anything could happen and no one would be the wiser.

'You should not be so careless with your reputation, your Grace.'

'I beg your pardon?'

His voice was gentle, but held a hint of disapproval. 'You were alone in the garden. With Barton, I mean.'

'Only because you wished me to distract him,' she said acerbically. 'You left the method to me.'

'And I did not expect you to choose that one, after what you said to me as we danced. Did you wish for him to kiss you?'

'Not particularly.'

There was a hesitation. 'Did you enjoy it?'

'That is a very impertinent question.'

'And that is a very evasive answer.'

'But it is all you will get from me,' she said. 'Did you at least get what you were searching for?'

'No, I did not. And what makes you think I was searching for anything?'

She tipped her head to the side, considering. 'I am not sure. But I hope, if you merely intended burglary, you would not want or need to involve me in it.'

He nodded. 'That is true. And do not worry. It will not happen again. I have involved you too much already.'

'That is all right,' she said hurriedly. 'It was not too great a burden.'

'Allowing Barton to kiss you in the moonlight.' There was a cynical bite to his words that did not escape her.

'It was only a kiss,' she responded.

'Oh, really? But a kiss can be a dangerous thing, if done correctly.' He swung her body into his and wrapped his arms around her. 'Allow me to demonstrate.' And then he brought his mouth down upon hers.

It was as it had been on the night in her room. His kiss was as heady and romantic as the smell of the roses in the garden, and she relaxed into it, letting it awaken her senses.

She slipped her arms inside his coat, and felt the muscles of his back and shoulders tense as her fingers touched him. His arms strained to pull her closer to him, and he stroked her tongue with his, varying the pressure of his lips against hers from punishing firmness to a featherlight touch. When he released her mouth, she caught him about the waist and arched her body away from him, baring her throat and willing him to kiss her there, and lower.

He accepted the invitation and his lips trailed fire down her neck to rest on her shoulder. 'Do you enjoy it when I kiss you?' he murmured into her skin.

'Yes.' She shuddered against him.

He ran a finger inside the neckline of her gown and pulled the dress away from her body, pushing to slide it down her arm. He planted a kiss just under the place where her dress should end, and she gasped.

He laughed and his finger traced her collarbone. 'I am going to kiss you there again. Hard enough to mark you. No one will know it but we two, because your gown will hide all. Would you like that?'

'Yes.' She shocked herself by saying it, knowing that it was true. 'Oh, yes.'

'I thought you might.' And he lowered his head again, and she felt him suck on the flesh, felt the feeling run through her all the way to her toes.

It was the work of a moment. And then it was over. He leaned his head against her ear and whispered, 'If you would kiss, then do not give them cheaply to one such as Barton. Choose someone worthy of your affection.' He walked her the last few steps through the trees and they came out at the bend of the drive. He whistled once and a carriage appeared from out of the darkness. Black and unmarked, with black horses and a driver muffled beyond recognition.

Smythe gave instructions to the driver and then he handed her up into the carriage, shutting the door behind her.

She leaned out of the window to where he stood in the road. 'Are you not coming as well?'

'My man will see you home.' There was hunger in his eyes as he stared up into her face. 'You are safer with him tonight than alone in a carriage with me.'

'But how will you get home?' And where is home? And are you alone there? She was bursting with unasked questions.

He smiled at her, his face dim in the light from the carriage lamps. 'Never worry about me, your Grace. I have ways. Until we meet again.' He bowed to her as the carriage pulled away and he disappeared into the darkness behind her.

She leaned back into the squabs, her heart hammering in her chest. He had been right about the danger in a kiss. His were as intoxicating as anything served at the party, and as compelling as Barton's were not.

Perhaps what Barton accused her of was true. She was more than willing to bend the rules if she felt she would not be caught. And Mr Smythe would see to it that what they did was safe and in secret.

Perhaps it was no more than that. He was passionate, but solicitous of her reputation. Where other men wished to parade her fallen virtue as a trophy to their skills at seduction, with Smythe no one would know that they had been together. When he was done with her he would leave as quietly as he had come, moving through her life like a fish through water.

And when they parted tonight, he had not said goodbye. She could scarce control herself at the thought of seeing him again. She could still feel the kiss, hot and sinful, a brand on her shoulder to remind her of all the ways and places he might kiss her, should she allow it.

And why had she been so quick to agree? Was it because he had not asked at all?

Not at first, perhaps. But once he had started, he had asked her what would make her happy. He had not tried to negotiate her out of her honour, or worried that he was being outbid by some other man. He had not given her an ultimatum, or threatened her with shame or discovery.

He'd given her the first kiss as a sample of what was to come, and pointed out that he could give her even more pleasure, this instant, if she would allow him to. There had been no talk of bracelets or houses, or paying off her grocer and cutting back her staff. Or even what he wanted from her. He had kissed her again because he had wanted to, and because he had known she would like it more than she had when kissing Barton. Just a moment of shared bliss, and then he was gone.

She slipped her own fingers under the shoulder of her dress, imagining that his lips were still on her. He had said that she wouldn't be safe with him, and she imagined him climbing in beside her and pulling her close in the darkness of the cab. She would be alone and completely at his mercy. And his hands would roam freely over her body, taking everything he wanted from her.

As though it mattered. She never wanted to be safe again.

She shook her head to clear the fantasy and leaned her face to the open window, feeling the breeze in her hair. She glanced at the passing streets. The direction seemed right, but how would the driver be able to find her house? She had not heard Smythe tell him the address.

She turned and knelt on the seat, opening the connecting window between the carriage and the driver. 'I live on Grosvenor Square, just past—'

'I know the way, your Grace. Do not concern yourself.'

He had used her title. And over the sound of the horses, she thought she heard a trace of amusement in his voice. He knew of her. And he knew other things as well.

'Your master, Mr Smythe—have you known him long?'

There was no answer. And the driver tickled the horses with the tassel of his whip so that their speed increased.

He was loyal. Enough so as not to speak. And Smythe trusted him more than he did himself.

Then that answered the question. The man was no casual hire, but a trusted associate. A partner in crime, perhaps?

They were nearing her house, and she bit her lip in frustration. She knew nothing about Mr Smythe. He was not one of Barton's familiars. And she had been too careless when he had been introduced to her and had not paid attention. She had not even heard his Christian name.

The carriage pulled smoothly to a stop in front of her home. The driver hopped down from the seat and opened the door for her, taking her hand and guiding her to the ground.

She looked at him, not sure what to expect. His face was no longer shielded from her, and she found it plain and honest. Surprisingly friendly. He was gazing back at her with a frank curiosity that she should have found inappropriate in a servant, had she not wanted words with him.

She tried again. 'Please. About Mr Smythe. I know very little. Not his address. Or even his first name. If I should need to contact him…' It was all horribly bold of her. The words died away in her throat.

The driver stared at her for a long moment, in a way that was totally devoid of subservience. And then his shoulders rose and fell once in a way that was part shrug and part silent laugh. He rummaged in his pocket, and came out with a white pasteboard, glancing at it before handing it to her. 'His card, your Grace.'

She swallowed. 'Thank you.' She tried not to appear too eager, but snatched the card from his hand, and turned from him, concealing it in the bodice of her dress. And then she ran up the walk and into her house.

Once inside, she fled up the steps and into her room, shutting the door and reaching down the front of her dress to find the card, nestled close between her breasts.

'Anthony de Portnay Smythe. Anthony Smythe. Tony. Anthony.' She tried various versions of the name, tasting them, and enjoying the way they felt on her tongue.

Before Susan came to help her undress for bed, she looked for a place to secrete the card, finally slipping it under her pillow. She could not help smiling at the foolishness of it, as her maid undid the hooks of her gown. As a token of affection, a calling card was not much to speak of. And the man had not given it to her, after all. Perhaps he did not mean for her to know more of him.

Susan was undoing her stays and as she turned the maid gave the slightest gasp. The mark was there on her shoulder. 'Did you have a pleasant evening, your Grace? At Lord Barton's party?' The remark was offhand, as though nothing unusual had sparked it.

'Most pleasant,' Constance answered, unable to resist a small sigh of pleasure.

'So I suspected.' Susan was faintly disapproving.

'Despite the presence of Lord Barton,' Constance corrected. 'The man continues to be quite odious. I do not plan to see him again.'

'I should hope not, your Grace.' This seemed to put the maid's fears to rest.

'Although there is another gentleman…' She hid her smile behind her hand.

Susan grinned back at her. 'If he puts such a sparkle in your eye, then he must be a most singular person.'

'But how is one to know, Susan,' she asked impulsively, 'what the intentions of a gentleman are? I have been wrong so many times in the past.'

'If he makes you happy, your Grace, perhaps it is time to think with your heart and not your head.'

The thrill of it ran through her. If she were to think with her heart, the choice would be easy. She wanted Anthony Smythe, and she could have him.

For now. Her mind brought it all crashing back down to earth. It was seductively pleasurable to think of Mr Smythe. And surely there was no harm in dreaming. But it would be a temporary solution at best. If she accepted any more purses from him, while allowing him to toy with her affections and use her body for his own pleasure, then she was little better than what she feared she would become.

But suppose he offered marriage?

The thought was as fascinating as it was horrifying. And not something that needed reckoning with. She would be a fool to trust him, or read too much into a few kisses. The first night, he had sworn that he loved another. He might be faithless to the other woman, and willing to dally with Constance for a while, if she encouraged him to. But in the end, his intentions to her would prove the same as all the others.

Although it might be more pleasurable with him, than with others, for he was as passionate as he was considerate.

But he was a thief, she reminded herself. Even should she wish for an honourable union, there would be no way to overlook her lover's chosen occupation. A breath of the truth would destroy her reputation along with his. Eventually, he would be caught, and hanged, and she would be ruined in the bargain. Worse than she was now, alone, unloved and disgraced as well.

She shook her head sadly at Susan. 'Alas, I think I cannot afford to allow my heart to lead in this. The answer is not Barton, certainly. But it cannot be the other, no matter how much I might wish it so.' She allowed Susan to help her into bed and to blow out the candle, leaving her in the dim light of the fire, alone between the cold sheets.

And almost without thinking, her hand stole beneath the pillows and sought the calling card, running her fingers along the edge, feeling the smoothness of the pasteboard, and stroking the engraving as sleep took her.

Chapter Six

Patrick opened the bed curtains with more vehemence than necessary. Tony squinted as the late-morning sunlight hit him. And now his servant was rattling the plates on the breakfast tray. 'And a good morning to you too, Patrick,' he grumbled, reaching a hand out for his coffee. Patrick did not approve of the hour his master had gotten in, did he? Then he could go to the devil.

After sending his carriage away, Tony had enjoyed the excellent hospitality of the Earl of Stanton, given his regards to Lady Esme, and assured St John that he had been quite mistaken about the Duchess of Wellford. The woman was innocent.

In all the ways that mattered to the State. He smiled in satisfaction as he remembered the way she'd bitten her lip when he'd sucked on her shoulder, and dug her fingers into his sides to pull him closer. A certain lack of innocence in other areas might not be the worst thing.

But it had been embarrassing to stand before Stanton and admit his lack of success, when it came to the rest of the Barton matter. He could report on the location of the printing press in the basement, along with the inks and the paper. There was no evidence that printing of any false bills had occurred, but all the components needed were easily accessible. It would do him no good to destroy the supplies, other than to demonstrate to Barton that someone had tumbled to his plan. Tony needed to get the plates, and they were most likely locked tight in the safe in the study, behind a Bramah lock where he could not get to them.

St John had been most unimpressed with the gravity of the situation.

'Try again,' St John had said, pouring another whisky for his guest.

The fact that the Bramah lock was reported to be unpickable had little impact on his host. Had he never seen the challenge lock that Bramah displayed in their shop window, to taunt thieves and lockpicks? The company offered two hundred guineas to the first man who could open it. It had stood for more than twenty years so far, with no one able to claim the prize.

Stanton was too kind to suggest the return of the down payment, but Tony suspected it might enter the conversation if he belaboured the impossibility of the task before him.

He could afford to return the money and walk away, of course. But it stung his pride to think that such a thing might be necessary. It went against his grain to admit defeat, and although the impregnability of the lock was common knowledge, common knowledge was frequently wrong. It might take more time than was available to a burglar, but perhaps with practice…

He looked at Patrick, who was laying out his clothes for the day, and turned his mind to more pleasant matters. Willing his face to give nothing away, he said, 'The return trip to the Wellford house was uneventful, I trust.'

Patrick finished brushing his coat before responding. 'A stray cat almost met an unfortunate end beneath the carriage wheels, but I was able to prevent disaster.'

'And the duchess arrived home safely?'

'To her very door. She was a most grateful, and, you will forgive me for noticing, sir, a most attractive passenger.'

Patrick approved. It was strangely pleasing to have his opinion of Constance confirmed by his valet.

'Although strangely talkative, for nobility,' Patrick continued. 'Most of the peerage can't be bothered…'

'Talkative?'

'Yes, sir.' Patrick returned to the choosing of shirts as if nothing important had been said.

When Tony could stand it no longer, he asked, 'And what did she say?'

'She asked after you, sir.'

'After me.' Tony sat up, almost spilling his coffee in the process.

'Indeed, sir.' Patrick set the rest of the breakfast tray in front of him, refilled the coffee cup and stepped away.

'And what did you tell her?'

'I didn't think it my place, sir.'

The man picked the damnedest times to remember his station and to behave as a servant.

'I assumed you must have had a reason for neglecting to mention your Christian name, or to give her your direction. Perhaps you had no wish to be troubled by the lady again.'

Tony groaned, and wiped his face with his hands. She did not know who he was? He'd been formally introduced to her, for God's sake.

And she had had eyes only for Barton. Tony stabbed his kipper with more force than necessary.

Patrick brightened. 'And then I realised what a great ninny you are around women, and more so with a certain woman in particular. And I suspected that you had merely forgotten the importance of the information. So I gave her one of your cards.'

Tony slumped in relief. 'And how did she receive it?'

Patrick mimed putting a calling card down the front of an imaginary dress. 'I dare say your good name has got further with the lady than you have yourself.'

Later, as Patrick shaved him, Tony could feel his face, set in a ridiculous grin. She'd wanted to know his name. And carried it next to her…heart.

The image of the card nestling against her body, warmed by her skin, made him almost dizzy with desire. Patrick was right, he should capitalise on the situation immediately. He rubbed a finger experimentally along his jaw line. Smooth. Not that she had complained the night before. But it would not do to let her think he took her interest for granted. 'Patrick, my best suit, please, I am going out. And extra care with the cravat, please.'

'Yes, sir.'

'And while I am gone, Patrick, I have a task that needs doing. Please go down to the Bramah Locks Company. I wish a safe installed in my study. Fitted with one of their fine locks. The job must be rushed, for I have valuables to store, and am most afraid of thieves.'

'Yes, sir.'

Two hours later, Tony had to admit that the day was not going to plan. He had imagined a quiet chat with Constance, in her sitting room. Kissing in the moonlight was all well and good. Much better than good, to be truthful. But he must make some attempt to assure her that in daylight he was not without the manners of a common gentleman, if their association was to go any further.

He ignored the novelty of it, and called at the front door, but was disappointed to find her Grace was not at home. He left a card and enquired of the butler, as politely as possible, where she might be on such a fine day.

And now he found himself frequenting the lending library in Bond Street, hoping to catch sight of her as she ran her errands. When she entered, he was paging though a volume of poems that he had read a hundred times, trying to appear the least bit interested in contents that he could barely see, since his reading glasses were at home in his desk.

And she was not alone, damn the luck. There was a man at her side who gave every indication of solicitous interest, and two young ladies as well.

What was he to do? In the scenario he'd imagined, she'd been shopping alone, or perhaps with her maid to carry packages. It would be easy to approach her and he would make some offhand remark that might make reference to the evening before without mentioning it directly.

She would laugh, and respond. He would offer to carry her books. She would graciously accept. Conversation would ensue. He would let slip certain facts, recognition would dawn in her eyes, and he would be spared the embarrassment of having to reintroduce himself to a woman who had known him since they were both three.

Nowhere in his plan had he considered that the position of book carrier and witty conversationalist might already be occupied. Tony could not very well pretend not to see her, and she could not help but notice him, for he'd positioned himself in such a way as to be unavoidable.

Damn it to hell, but he must speak to her.

He turned and took a step towards her, just as she made to go past. And in the second before he spoke, he caught her eye as it tried to slide past without meeting his. There was alarm, followed by embarrassment, and finally resignation, before she managed to choose an expression to suit the situation—a friendly smile that said to the people around her, I think I know this man, but am unsure.

It was too late. The words were already out of his mouth. 'Your Grace. A most lovely day, is it not?'

'Why, yes. Yes, it is. Mr…'

'Smythe, ma'am. We met at Lord Barton's party last evening.' The words sounded false, but she leapt on them as salvation.

'Why, of course. How foolish of me. Mr Smythe, may I introduce Viscount Endsted and his sisters, Catherine and Susanne.'

'Ladies. Your lordship.' He made his best bow, and was dismayed to hear the ladies giggle in appreciation.

When his eyes rose to Constance, he saw fresh alarm there at the young ladies' reaction. He was not suitable for them, either. Once he had gone, she would have to warn them off.

'Mr Smythe.' There was a slight emphasis on the mister, and the Viscount took a step forward to head off the interested sisters and gripped his hand.

His handshake was firm to an almost painful degree. Tony considered, for a moment, the advantage to responding in kind, then discarded it as infantile.

As the viscount sensed him yield, he released his grip as well. Endsted glanced at the book in Tony's hand. 'Byron?'

'Yes. I find it—' How did he find it? He did not wish to give the wrong answer and further jeopardise his position with Constance. 'Most edifying.'

Endsted's sisters giggled, and Endsted glared at them. 'The man's scandalous. I do not hold with him. Not in the least.'

'I have no real opinion of the man,' Tony responded, 'for I have never met him. But his poetry is in no way morally exceptionable.' He glanced to Constance.

She looked as though she would rather cut out her tongue than have an opinion. Endsted was glaring at her, waiting for her to agree.

'He is rather fast,' she managed. She flashed a brief, hopeless look in Tony's direction, before looking to Endsted for approval.

Endsted nodded. 'His works are not fit for a lady.'

Which showed how little the man knew of ladies or of poetry, Tony suspected. 'I do not know, sir. I find his skill with words to be an excellent tribute for certain ladies.'

Constance pretended to ignore the compliment, but he could see a faint flush at the neck of her gown.

'But not something one might wish to speak of in a lending library.'

Tony chose to ignore the man's disapproval and answered innocently, 'For myself, I should think there would be no better place to discuss books.'

'I suppose it is a way to pass the time for one who has nothing better to do than read poetry.' He said the last words as if reading were one step from taking opium with Lord Byron himself. 'And now, sir, if you will excuse us.' He took Constance by the arm and led her past.

She did not look back, although the Endsted sisters cast a backward glance in his direction, giggling again.

Tony debated calling the man back to argue poetry, morality and general manners, or planting him a facer and reading works by the scandalous Lord Byron over his prone body, then thought the better of it. He doubted demonstrating Endsted's ignorance would win him points in the eyes of Constance, and might endear him further to the man's sisters, which was a fate to be avoided.

And he had no evidence that there was any behaviour that might find favour with Constance. At least, in the light of day. There was no question that she responded to him in the dark. And she did so in a way that made it very hard for him to wish to remove himself totally from her company.

But it appeared likely that, should he continue to meet with her, he would spend evenings losing all reason in her passionate embrace, only to be replaced at the breakfast table by a viscount and his giggling sisters. And really, if she wanted to marry another peer, then who was he to stand in her way? She had her own future to attend to, and, if he loved her, he must accept the fact that it was not in her best interest to associate with him.

All in all, his life had been much easier before he'd climbed in her window. His nights had been lonely and his passion had been hopeless. But he had made peace with that years ago. Now, the only hope he had of a return to peace was to put all thoughts of Constance Townley aside, and spend evenings in quiet communion with his lockpicks and his new safe.

He set the book back on a nearby shelf, and yielded the field to the better man.

Chapter Seven

'Lemon?' Constance arranged the tea things, for the hundredth time, trying to ignore Endsted's growing irritation with her.

'No, thank you.' Looking at the sour expression on the viscount's face, she suspected he had no need of any additional bitterness. She offered the sugar, instead.

She offered each, in turn, to his two sisters, and they helped themselves, casting sidelong glances at her last, uninvited tea guest.

When there was no one else to serve, she turned to him, and repeated her offer in a tone that she hoped would tell him to take his tea and go to the devil.

'Thank you.' Jack Barton smiled as though there was nothing unusual in her voice, took the lemon she offered, and set it at the side of his saucer.

She felt his fingers brush hers, and silently cursed. She had been too slow to move, and he had managed to arrange the accidental touch.

And Endsted had noticed. He was an annoyingly observant man. He was also upright, noble and extremely respectable, if a bit of a prig. But he was the first man whose company she had shared who was clear in his willingness to introduce her to his family. His intentions were honourable, or he'd never have allowed her to meet his sisters.

And she had managed to disappoint him, first with Mr Smythe, now with Barton, who had been waiting in her sitting room when they'd returned from the library, uninvited and unmoving.

And Susan had made her day even more of a disaster, by whispering that, while Lord Barton had taken up residence despite her encouragement that waiting would not be welcome or convenient, Mr Smythe had been most co-operative and departed after enquiring of her whereabouts.

So Smythe had been hoping to see her when they'd met in the library. She had feared as much. From a distance, he'd appeared to be the poised and confident man that she'd seen at the ball the previous evening.

But as she'd approached him, she'd seen an eagerness in his manner that she had not seen in a man in…How long had it been? Since she'd had suitors, well before Robert. Long ago, when those who sought her affections had had hopes of success and fears of disappointment. There had been none of the sly looks and innuendos that accompanied all interactions with men now that she was a widow.

Tony Smythe had looked at her as though the years had meant nothing, and she was a fresh young girl with more future than responsibilities. And she had crushed him by her indifference.

She had feared, last night, that there would be nothing to speak of, should she see him in daylight. But today she had found him reading Byron.

She adored Byron.

She looked across the table at Endsted, and remembered that he found Byron most unsuitable. If she succeeded with him, there would be no more poetry in her life. She could spend her evenings reading educational and enlightening tracts to Endsted's rather foolish sisters.

She looked to her other side, at Lord Barton. Surely a boring life with Endsted would be preferable to some fates.

Of course, Mr Smythe would read Byron to her. In bed, if she asked him to. Or would have done, had she not set him down in public to secure her position with Endsted. She doubted she would be seeing him again.

And why was she thinking of him at all, when she needed to keep her mind on her guests? She dragged her attention back to managing the men in front of her. Silence between them was long and cold on Endsted's side. It appeared he had heard the rumours of Barton's character and was only suffering contact with him out of straining courtesy to Constance.

Barton did not seem to mind the frigid reception. He ignored Endsted and smiled at the ladies. 'Might I remark, Lord Endsted, on the attractiveness of your sisters.'

Endsted glared and the girls giggled.

'I cannot remember a day when I have been so fortunate as to find myself in the company of so many charming young ladies.' He focused his gaze for more than a little too long on the eldest, Catherine, until she coloured and looked away.

'Are you a friend of Constance's?' the girl asked timidly.

'Oh, a most particular friend,' Barton answered.

Constance could not very well deny it while the man was in her parlour, sipping her tea. She dare not explain, in front of her other guests, that she allowed him there only because of the things he might say to them about her, should she try to have him removed.

'Yes,' Barton repeated, 'I am a friend of her Grace, and would like to be your friend as well, should your brother allow it. Might I have permission to call upon you tomorrow?'

'Most certainly not.' Endsted's composure snapped, and he rose from the table. 'Catherine, Susanne. We are leaving.'

The girls did not like the command, but they responded quickly, and rose as well. He shepherded them towards the door, and turned back to Barton and Constance. 'I know your measure, sir, as does the rest of decent society. And I'll thank you to give my family a wide berth in the future. If I catch you dangling after my sisters again, we will settle this on the field of honour and not in a drawing room.'

And then he turned to Constance, and there was disappointment, mingling with his anger. 'I cannot know what you were thinking, to allow him here. If you will not be careful of your guests, Constance, at least have a care for yourself.' And with a final warning glance, he left the room.

She turned back to the tea table, where Barton had returned to his seat, and his cup. She stood above him, hands planted on hips, and he had not even the courtesy to rise for her. The insults and the threats from Endsted had had no effect on his composure, either. He had the same serene smile as when she'd returned home to find him waiting.

'There,' Constance snapped. 'Endsted has gone, and I doubt he will return. I hope you are satisfied.'

Barton looked at her, and his gaze was so possessive and familiar that she wished she could strike him. He stared as if he could see through her clothes. 'Not totally. But I expect I soon will be.'

'If that was some pitiful attempt at a double entendre, you needn't bother.'

'Oh, really, it is no bother. In fact, I quite enjoy it.'

She shuddered in revulsion. 'You horrible, horrible man. I do not care how you feel about it. I do not enjoy it. I find it offensive. It is vile. I cannot make it any plainer than that. I do not want you, or your rude comments. If you persist in your pursuit of me, my response will be the same as it was the last time: I do not want you. I will not want you. I never want to see you again. Now get out of my house.' By the time she was finished, she was shouting.

'Your house?' He smiled and his tone never wavered.

And, suddenly, she knew that he knew about the loss of the deed and she also had a horrible suspicion about its current ownership.

'I believe you are mistaken,' he continued, 'about this being your house. If it were yours, you would be able to show me the deed, would you not?'

He knew. He had to. But if there was even the smallest chance that she was wrong, she would keep up the pretence. 'I do not have it here. It is in the bank, where it can be kept safe.'

'Is it, now?' He wagged a finger at her. 'I think, Constance, that you are not telling me the whole truth. It is far more likely that your nephew had the deed in his keeping, not wishing to give up his power over you so easily. He is not the best card player, even when sober. And he is rarely sober, Constance. Quite likely to gamble away his estate.' He smiled coldly. 'Not his estate, perhaps. When

one loses enough in a night to equal the cost of one's townhouse…well, one might as well lose the cost of another house instead.'

'He didn't.'

'I'm afraid he did. The deed is safe enough. I have it in my possession. Would you like to give me a tour of my property? We could begin upstairs.'

'I do not believe you,' she stalled.

'Then you must go to the duke and ask him. It must be very trying for you to have your future in the hands of such an idiot.'

She grasped at her last hope. 'Freddy cannot legally give away what is not his. I will appeal to the courts. It is my house. My name is on the deed.'

Barton shrugged. 'Now, perhaps. But it does not take much talent to change a few lines of ink. By the time anyone sees the paper, I will be sure it says what I wish it to say. You will find, Constance, that the courts will want proof. You will have your word, of course. But I will have evidence. If you have any doubts, you can ask Freddy what he has to say on the matter.'

Too late to pretend, then. 'Lord Barton…' she began hesitantly. 'I have already been to see the duke, and he has explained to me what has become of the house.'

Barton nodded, still smiling.

She swallowed. 'And I assume that there will be a rent set, now that I am your tenant.'

He was enjoying her discomposure. 'You know that it is not money that I want from you.'

She closed her eyes in defeat. 'Then I will be out of the house by morning.'

He grabbed her wrist and her eyes snapped open at the shock of the unwelcome contact. 'Not so fast, my dear. I understand it is fully furnished. There is an attached inventory. If you can assure me that everything is in its proper place, we can dispense with the tour.'

She wet her lips. He knew that her furniture had gone the way of her jewels. There was no point in pretending it had not.

'There is an easier way, you know. You stay in the house. You keep the servants and I give you enough money to replace all that you have taken, even the stones in the rest of your jewellery. But you accept the fact that it is my house that you live in, and I will come and go, and do as I please when here. And no door will be barred to me.'

The hand on her wrist relaxed into a gentle grip. 'It is not an unpleasant proposition I am making, I assure you. I am not a cruel man. My mistresses have always found me to be generous and they assure me I am good company. But I do not like to be opposed.'

'And I do not like to be forced.'

'You are not being forced. You have options. You can leave the house and its contents intact. Then there will be no reason for me to call the law to retrieve my property. Or you can accept that you are my guest here, and treat me with the gratitude I deserve for solving so many of your problems. I will give you two days to consider the matter. That should be enough time to put your house in order.'

He snapped his fingers. 'Correction. My house in order. I will return on Monday, Constance. At that time, you will give me the keys. Whether you stay or go is completely up to you. Until then.' And he bent his head to hers and kissed her.

She wished that it had been a repellent kiss, and that she had fought it, as one would fight untimely death. But instead, she closed her eyes and leaned into him, opening her mouth and trying to remember what it had been like to kiss Robert so.

She had to admit the truth to herself: Barton was not unskilled at kissing. If it were not Barton holding her, the experience would not be unpleasant. He did a creditable job of trying to arouse her passions.

She imagined she was in Tony's arms, and she did a creditable job of pretending to be aroused. And so it was likely to be from now on.

'That was not so very bad, was it?'

Her voice quavered as she spoke, and she could feel a flush of shame on her face. 'We are not finished here, Jack. Do not think that you have won.'

'We can discuss my chances of victory on Monday, Constance. Until then.'

And he left her there, trembling with rage. It was one thing to sell one's dreams to get a husband. If there was no promise of love, then at least there was a guarantee of security until such time as the fool man had to go and die, leaving one's future in the hands of his idiot nephew…

She shook her head. She would not let Barton use her at his will, and cast her off when he tired of her. There had to be another way. If she had the deed and the inventory, then the house would be hers. She would put it somewhere safe, out of the hands of Freddy and all others, as she should have done from the first. There would be no further discussion.

But Barton was not likely to give it to her just because she wanted it. He would make her earn it. If she wanted it, then she must find a way to take it from him. She imagined sneaking into his house in the night, and rifling his desk. He would keep it somewhere he could look at it and admire his cleverness, much as he planned to keep her on display in her own house.

All she need do was go to his house under cover of darkness, find the deed, and steal away with it without anyone noticing. An impossibility. Even if she could get past the locked door, she doubted she would have the nerve necessary to take the thing.

But she knew someone with nerve enough for both of them. Her heart skipped at the memory of him climbing boldly out of her window and down to the ground as silently as a shadow. And he had been in the study before. He might even know where to look.

If she could make him do it for her. She had done what he wished at the previous night's ball. He had said that would clear any debt she might owe, with regards to the money he had left her. And she had allowed him to kiss her in the garden. But she had hurt him, too, in the circulating library. What reason could he possibly have to help her, after that?

The same reason everyone else had to offer her assistance. He, at least, had made a more interesting proposition when he'd made her pay him back. And he'd left her with hard currency to trade.

And, she had to admit it, a certain willingness to barter. Did she seriously plan to sell her honour so cheaply?

She thought of the single kiss in the moonlight, and the way her body had responded as they'd danced. She was hardly selling herself cheap if it was a house she gained. And it was not as if she would need feign too hard, when the moment came to give all. It might be quite pleasant to lie back and let him have his way.

She flushed. Her current fantasy of what might happen when next she was alone with Anthony Smythe had very little to do with passive submission to his advances. She must take care or her response, when the moment came, was likely to be aggressive to an unladylike degree.

But to the matter at hand, how did one go about offering oneself in exchange for services?

She shuddered. That was what she was planning to do. And it did no good to paint the act in romantic fantasies, even if the experience proved as pleasant as it was likely to. Any relationship they might have after tonight would be in fulfilment of a transaction and not the passionate idyll she'd created in her imagination.

She sighed. If life were dreams, it would not be as it had been in the library, today. She would have come upon Mr Smythe when she was alone, and he would ply her with poetry and promises of discretion. They would meet in secret, and he would grow bolder with each meeting. She would put up a token display of resistance before succumbing to his considerable romantic skills. Their inevitable parting would be bittersweet, but she would have a memory that she could carry into whatever cold future awaited her.

But now, she must forgo romance and throw herself on the mercy of the thief, or she would be spending her immediate future in the company of Lord John Barton. Nothing was lost, she reminded

herself. Neither path led to a likelihood of slow seduction by Anthony Smythe, but one was infinitely more pleasant, once she got over the initial distaste of being so forward as to make the first move.

And if she was to move, there was no time to waste. She hurried up the stairs to her room and called for her maid. 'Susan?'

'Yes, your Grace.'

'I am going out. The gold dress, I think.' It was attractive on her, she thought. And she wished to look her best. Susan helped her into the gown and Constance appraised herself in the pier glass.

She had always thought this her most lovely gown, but now she was not so sure. It was grand, certainly. The gold threads caught the candlelight, and tiny beads glittered in the poufs of white satin that trimmed it, and weighted the skirt. But it seemed too stiff and formal for what she had in mind this particular evening.

She wanted to be beautiful for him. A prize worthy of any risk he might take to achieve it. But she did not want to seem unapproachable. How best to make the point clear? She took a deep breath to steady herself, and then she said, 'Susan, help me out of these stays.'

Her maid's eyes widened in alarm. 'You are not going to see Lord Barton again, are you, your Grace?'

'I should think not, Susan. I know someone who might be willing to help on that account, if I ask him nicely.' And with no stays, she would not have to ask aloud.

The maid nodded. 'Very good, ma'am.' Susan removed the dress, helped her out of her corset and tossed the dress back over her head.

The effect was startling. While the fabric was not sheer, it clung to her body, heavy with the weight of the beads. She could almost see the outline of her breasts inside the dress.

And if she could see them, so could he.

She swallowed. Very well. At least there would be no misunderstanding. It needed but one thing to complete the effect. She closed her eyes in embarrassment. 'Susan? How does one damp one's skirts?'

'Your Grace?' Her maid gave an incredulous giggle.

'I've heard of it's being done, but I don't think I've ever actually seen it…'

Chapter Eight

The evening found her shivering inside her cloak, waiting for Mr Smythe to enter his study. Constance had discovered the reason, firsthand, why the practice of dampened petticoats had never caught on. She had thought it was the extreme immodesty that prevented popularity. But now that she had tried it, she suspected it had as much to do with the discomfort involved. The fabric was cold and wet against her body, and she thought she was as likely to catch her death as catch a man because of it.

But the image presented when she saw herself in the mirror might be most effective, if the object of the evening was seduction. The thin fabric of the skirt clung to her legs and outlined her hips and belly. Without the troublesome stays, her breasts rested soft and full in the bodice of her dress, and tightened in response to the chill of the skirts. The rouge on her cheeks and lips was subtle, but made her mouth look kissable in the candlelight. There was no trace left of the aloof duchess to obscure the vulnerable and desirable woman she saw there.

When she'd arrived at Smythe's rooms, she'd almost lost her nerve, and had clung to the cloak as her last line of protection when the servant had offered to take it. It would be hard enough to shed, once the object of her mission was in sight, and she meant to keep it as long as she could.

At last, Smythe stepped into the room, and she turned to greet him.

He smiled politely. 'Your Grace? To what do I owe the honour of this visit?'

She let the cloak slip from her shoulders and drop to the floor around her.

There was a long pause, as he took in her appearance. And then, he said, 'Oh.' And his face went blank.

She waited, but no response was forthcoming. He stood, rooted to the spot, silent and staring at her as though he did not quite understand what he was seeing.

Dear God, what had she done? She had assumed that she recognised his interest. And he had kissed her. Twice. But perhaps he was thus with all women when he was alone with them.

It had been the servant who had given her the direction to this place, not Mr Smythe. She had not thought, before coming here, to question whether he wished to entertain her in his home. He had certainly never invited her to it. After the afternoon in the library, he might not wish to see her at all, much less see her nearly naked in his study.

He might have other plans for the evening. He might not be alone. Worse yet, he might be married, although there was nothing about the rooms to indicate the fact. And she had blundered forward, dressed like a courtesan and expecting a warm greeting.

She stared down at the cloak on the floor, willing it to jump back into place around her shoulders, and then she looked back at Mr Smythe.

He was still staring at her, taking in every detail. He forgot himself and sat down. And then sprang from his chair, and motioned to her. 'Please, sit. May I offer you a drink? Tea?'

She sank gratefully on to a nearby settee. 'Sherry?'

'Of course.' She noted the speed with which he summoned a servant, and the eagerness of his voice. He did not let his man come fully into the room, blocking the entrance with his body and taking the tray from him at the door. Then he returned to her, busying himself with the pouring of wine as though he did not know what to do with his hands.

Did this mean he was still interested in her? Or had she embarrassed him in some way? Until he spoke, it was difficult to tell. But whatever he felt, it wasn't anger, for he showed no sign of turning her out, and he'd have done it by now, surely.

He offered her a glass, but still said nothing. She took her sherry and sipped, crossing her legs, and watching as he watched the movement of her skirt and swallowed some of his own wine.

At last she could stand the silence no longer. All the witty conversational gambits she'd imagined had involved two people who were capable of speech. There would be no clever sparring around the

truth, or coy avoidance if she could not get Tony to respond beyond a monosyllable. Finally she gave up and went directly to the reason for her visit, without preamble. 'I need your help.'

'Anything,' he breathed. And then he remembered to look into her eyes. He cleared his throat, and his face went blank again, as he pretended that he had not just been trying to stare through her clothes. When he spoke, his voice had returned to its normal tone. 'How may I assist you? I am at your service.'

Very well. He wished to pretend that there was nothing unusual about her appearance? Then so would she. She stared unflinchingly into his eyes. 'I need something taken. Stolen, from another person.' Her nerve began to falter. 'It was mine to begin with, so in a sense, it is not stealing at all.'

His voice hardened, as he responded. 'Do not justify. I trust that you would never ask this of me if the reason were not a good one. You need something taken? Then I am your man. Direct me to it.'

'Jack Barton has the deed to my house. My house, mind you. Not my husband's or my nephew's. It was promised to me.' She heard the whine in her voice, and took a deep breath. 'I assume you can guess the reason why he might wish to keep it. It is very economical on his part to allow me to remain in my own house, in exchange for my hospitality when he visits me there. He needn't even let some rooms.'

She was pleased to see the murderous look on the face of Mr Smythe as the situation sunk in.

'And I would like to have it back. But I am not sure where he might be keeping it.'

'That is all right,' he said hurriedly. 'I have a pretty good idea of its location. It was a rum trick to play on you, and I have no objection to settling the score. I'll fix the bastard so that he's ill inclined to try it again.' He seemed almost relieved not to have to think about her, and his eyes lost focus as he began to plan the job. 'The thing will take several days, but you must be patient and allow me to know what is best in this matter. I will bring the deed to you as soon as I have it safely away.'

'I need it before Monday. That is when he means to…take occupancy.'

His attention snapped back to the present, and he was aware of her again. There was a long pause, and for a moment, she feared that he was about to retract his offer of help. Then he said, 'Monday? This is not an easy thing you are asking. But I understand that your need is urgent. I will adjust my own plans so that I may help you. You will have it by Monday.'

'Thank you.'

There was another long silence. She had expected that this was where he would explain to her the cost of the service, and she took another sip of the sherry, wetting her lips to agree, when he asked.

But he said nothing. He just continued to gaze at her, watching her lips as she drank the sherry, scanning slowly down to admire her breasts, making no effort to clarify her position. She could feel her skin grow warm under his gaze, and her nipples tightening.

At last she could no longer stand the silence. She stared down into her wine glass and said, 'If you were to do this for me, I would be very grateful. Once it is done, of course. Once the item is returned to me, there is nothing that you would ask that I would refuse.'

'Nothing,' he said flatly.

'Nothing,' she affirmed.

'Anything I might think to ask in payment, any request I might make, you would be willing to comply?'

She ignored the heat rising in her. 'Yes.'

His voice dropped to a sensuous murmur, and she could feel the words dancing along her nerves. 'Be warned, I have an extremely vivid imagination.'

Suddenly, so did she. She closed her eyes tight and the fantasies that rose at the sound of his voice became more intense. Her blood sizzled as she imagined what it might be like to submit to the whims of a man who was little more than a stranger—a hardened criminal, accustomed to taking what he wanted. 'Anything you wish.'

'But what will you say in the morning, I wonder?' His voice had returned to normal again.

'I have no idea what you mean,' she responded, a little too easily.

'I should think it's obvious. It was to me, at least. I am not good enough to be seen with, when you are in the presence of your friends. It is much safer here, is it not, where there is no one you know?'

The words stung her. 'And how could I have introduced you to Endsted?' she retorted. 'This is Mr Smythe. We met in my bedroom, when he was stealing my jewellery. Really, Tony, you ask the impossible of me.'

'Tony, is it, now? I had no idea, your Grace, that we had progressed to that level of familiarity. I suppose I should be flattered. When you meet me in the future, you may call me whatever you choose. You need not mention knowing me in my professional capacity at all. We have been introduced at a formal gathering, although you did not pay a great deal of attention at the time. You have danced with me. We have made polite conversation. I had hoped that you might be able to treat me as you treat others. And as I have treated you: with courtesy and respect.'

'Courtesy and respect? That is beyond enough. You have taken liberties with my person.'

'I apologise,' he responded stiffly. 'I rather thought, at the time, that you enjoyed them. And if I do not miss my guess, you just invited to do as I pleased with you. But if I was mistaken, and have been taking unwelcome liberties, then I humbly apologise. It will not happen again.'

Her anger faded, as she remembered how he'd looked in the library. She had hurt him with her snub. And now she had come to his rooms to hurt him again. She could feel the cool air passing through her gown, fighting back the heat in her skin. She was being utterly shameless, trying to trap Tony into helping her. And yet she was berating him for his behaviour. She looked down at the designs her toe was tracing in the rug. 'I mis-spoke. You have not taken anything from me that was not freely offered. But Barton came to my rooms after we spoke this afternoon. And in my panic, I could not think where else to turn. I thought, after the kiss in the garden, you would not be averse to my offer tonight.'

He laughed. 'Oh, your Grace, I'm not averse. Not in the slightest. Especially with you dressed like that.' He stared at her body, making no effort to hide his interest. Finally, he gave a deep sigh of satisfaction. 'Say the word and I'll have you on the hearthrug, right now, and make sure you don't regret the offer. But understand, if I wished to be compensated for my services, I would request payment in full, up front of the job.' He stared into her eyes and his smile faded. 'With the risks I'm taking, I never withhold pleasure or payment for tomorrow. One can not guarantee the outcome. If they catch me and hang me, your gratitude is worthless.'

'Very well, then.' Here and now? He would not even lead her to his bed? She felt her knees turn to water and a tremor of excitement go through her at the thought of what was about to happen. She reached to undo her bodice, trying not to rush in her eagerness.

'I did not request payment.'

Her hand stopped.

'When did I ever demand anything of you?' he asked softly. 'I said I would do this for you, and I shall. I do not wish to—how did you put it?—"take liberties". From you, I do not wish to take anything at all. I will take care of your problem.' He waved his hand as though dealing with Barton were no more difficult than shooing a fly. 'Tonight, all you needed to do was ask and I would have offered to do all in my power to aid you. And as a gentleman, I do not require your gratitude afterwards. Do not mention it again.'

'Thank you.' But she did not feel like thanking him. She felt like shouting at him. And the flush in her cheeks was from shame, not excitement.

There was another long pause. And his eyes remained focused on her face, studiously ignoring the rest of her. 'Is there anything else you wished of me?'

There were many things, none of which she could very well ask for. To begin with, she wanted him to gaze at her as he had done, when she had entered the room, and not with the coldness and disdain he was showing now. 'No, I think that is all.'

He nodded, and said nothing more. His expression did not change. The silence stretched between them.

'I should probably be going, then.'

He nodded. 'I think that's best. Do you wish me to escort you home?' And now he showed the same level of concern that any gentleman might show to a lady.

'No. I am all right. It was not far to walk.' She could not stand the embarrassment of his respect a moment longer.

'You walked?' His voice held disapproval. 'It is not seemly or safe for a woman to travel alone at night. I will tell Patrick to get you a hackney.'

'No.' She had shocked him, by her behaviour, by coming alone to his home, and by her dress, or lack thereof. This was not how the night was to end at all.

'I insist.' His voice was emphatic, so she nodded and rose. He reached for her cloak and dropped it on to her shoulders, concealing her body from view before opening the door. She reached to pull it closed in front of her.

He escorted her to the door of his study and out into the hall. He directed his servant to find her transportation. Then he turned his back upon her and returned to his room.

The servant whom she had met the previous night led her down the stairs and left her standing at the front door, as he hailed a cab for her, and she sensed pity in his smile as he helped her into the coach.

Anthony returned to his chair and waited until the door closed behind her, and then waited a little longer. He imagined her progress through the house and out of the front door. Then he drained his wine in a gulp, and called for his valet.

The man appeared like a ghost behind him. 'Sir?'

'Patrick, bring me brandy. And plenty of it.'

'Yes, sir.' Patrick was resigned to his master's behaviour, even if he did not approve of it. He left the room and reappeared a short time later, carrying a tray laden with a full bottle of the best brandy in the cellars.

Patrick poured the first glass, and when he seemed to be finished, his master signalled him with a raising of the hand. 'Eh, eh, eh, a little more, still.' Tony watched the level rise in the glass. He held up a hand. 'Stop. That's the ticket. And keep them coming, Patrick.' He drank half the brandy and blurted, 'That woman. I swear, Patrick, she will be the death of me. I cannot countenance what she did, just now.' He finished the glass, and held it out to be refilled.

'First she snubs me in public, and makes it known to me that she prefers another. Then she comes to me, soft and willing, just as I've always dreamed she would. She is finally here, and wants my help. And at any time, does she recognise me? No.'

'It has been a long time, sir. Both you and she have changed significantly.'

'One thing has not changed. She did not want me then, and she does not want me now. Did you see her? Dear God.' He allowed himself a moment of carnal pleasure at the memory. 'No stays, thin silk gown, and I swear she'd damped the skirts.' He shook his head. 'Like a French woman. Nothing left to imagination, not that my imagination needs any help when it comes to her. But she should not have been out in the streets in that condition. She'd catch her death. She made it quite clear, in the library today, that she wanted no part of me, and that our association was an embarrassment.

'Very well. I do not need to be told twice. I meant to avoid her in the future. If she does not want me, then there is no point in making an even greater fool of myself than I have been.' He stared down into his second brandy. He was already feeling the effects of the first, and thought the better of the second drink, tossing the contents of the glass into the fire, listening to the spirits hissing in the flames.

'A few hours pass, and she comes to my room dressed to seduce me. Very well, thinks I. She has no trouble acknowledging me when we are alone. If I had any pride, I would refuse her. Which would prove I'm an even bigger fool than I thought, for how can I turn down an offer like this? She's been married long enough to know what's what and widowed long enough to miss it. She might ignore me tomorrow, but the morning is a long way off, and we'll have a time of it tonight.'

He stared down into his empty glass, and Patrick shook his head and poured again.

'And why did she come to me? She wants me to steal for her. Not a problem, of course. I'd die for her, if she but asked. Burglary is not a sticking point. And if I did, she would deign to lie with me. Afterwards. In gratitude.' He closed his eyes and drank more slowly this time.

'She looked at me with those sherry-coloured eyes, and hung her head as though the path to my bed was a passage to Botany Bay.' He finished the brandy and said sadly, 'It was not the way I'd imagined it.'

Patrick looked at him in disappointment. 'What you have wanted for half your life was here, within your grasp. And you choose instead to send it away and call for a brandy bottle.'

'It wasn't what I wanted,' he argued. 'Her gratitude, indeed.'

'What, exactly, do you want from her, then, if not to lie with her?'

'I want her to see me for who I am, even if she cannot see me for who I was. All she sees is the thief, Patrick. And to catch him, she was willing to be the whore that a thief deserved.' He thought back to the sight of her, her breasts swaying beneath her gown, her legs outlined by the cloth. 'Not that I minded, seeing her. But I wager she does not dress thusly when she is trying to impress Endsted.'

'Would you wish her to, sir?'

'No. Of course not. If it were my choice, she would not see Endsted, again, under any circumstances. And I would make damn sure that he never got to see what I saw tonight. The man is an utter prig. I doubt he'd have known what to do with her, in any case.'

'Unlike you, sir, Endsted would have sat there like a lecher, staring at her charms while making it clear that he disapproved of her behaviour. And then he would have insulted her by sending her away. She would have gone home, with head hung low and near tears, convinced that she was in some way morally repellent or deformed in body. I am sure she will think twice in the future before exposing to the gentleman in question any sign of interest or vulnerability that might lead to further ridicule.'

Tony ignored the dark look that Patrick was giving him, to drive the point home. 'You're saying I should go to her, then. Apologise.'

Patrick nodded. 'Because there is nothing that will make amends better than appearing on her doorstep after half a bottle of brandy, and trying to say the things in your heart that you cannot manage to say when you are sober.'

'Damn it, Patrick. Other men's valets will at least lie to them when they have made fools of themselves.'

'If it is any consolation, sir, Lord Endsted's valet often has cause to lie to his master on that score. We have discussed it.'

Tony held up a hand. 'Let us hear no more of Viscount Endsted. My night is quite grim enough, without thinking of him, or knowing that valets trade stories when they are gathered together. It chills the blood. Instead, tell me, Patrick, since you are so full of honesty, what am I to do to make amends with the Duchess of Wellford?'

'Perhaps, sir, it would go a long way to restoring her good humour, if you did the thing that she wished you to do in the first place.'

'You have returned early, your Grace.' Susan was looking at her with curiosity, no doubt trying to spy some evidence of carnal activity. 'Was the gentleman you wished to visit not at home?'

'On the contrary, he was in, and willing to see me.'

'That was quick.' Susan's face moued in disapproval. 'But I suppose it's the same with all men. The more time we takes on our appearance, the less time they needs. It don't seem right, somehow.'

Constance started at the familiarity, then admitted the truth. 'He sent me home. He took one good look at me, and he sent me away.' She looked at her maid, hoping that Susan could provide some explanation.

'He did not find you attractive?'

She sat on the end of the bed, shivering in the damp gown. 'He as much as said he did. He made comment on my appearance. He knew how I expected the evening to end. And he turned me down. I fear I have insulted him. Or lessened his opinion of me.'

'Then your friend left you to settle with Lord Barton yourself?' Susan looked more than a little dismayed at the thought.

'No. There was no problem about that. Mr Smythe said he was most willing to help, but that my gratitude was not necessary. Then he covered me up and sent me away.'

Susan sat on the end of the bed as well, clearly baffled. 'Forgive me for saying it, your Grace, but he must be a most unusual gentleman.'

Constance frowned. 'I think so as well, Susan.'

Anthony stared at the locked door of Barton's safe, and felt the sweat forming on his palms. He wiped his hands on his trouser legs and removed the picks from his coat pocket. Now was not the time for a display of weak nerves or a distaste for the work at hand. He could fulfil his promise to Stanton and destroy the plates by burning the house down if he could not manage to open the safe.

But for the promise to Constance? A fire would do him no good, for it would destroy the thing he searched for. And she wanted immediate action.

Patrick had been right. It had been stupid of him to give way to temper, and waste the better part of the evening with drink. When reason had begun to return, he had realised that he might need every spare moment between now and Monday, working on the lock, if he wished to deliver the deed to Constance and forestall Barton. He had been forced to spend several more hours becoming sober enough to do the job at all, and still might not be unaffected enough to do it well.

Now, it was past three and he had but a few hours before dawn. It was the quietest part of the night, when all good men were asleep, leaving the bad ones the freedom to work in peace.

Entry to the study was as uneventful as it had been the night of Barton's ball, even though he'd climbed up a drainpipe and into the window instead of using the stairs. Would that the results with the safe would be more successful than the last attempt.

The thing was still there, taunting him from its place on the wall behind the desk. Barton had not even bothered to conceal it, leaving its obvious presence as a sign of its impregnability.

If the man had anything of value, it was most assuredly behind the locked safe door. Tony had found the printing press in the basement along with the rest of the supplies, hidden under a Holland cloth, with little effort made to conceal them.

But there was no law against owning a press. To rid Barton of the paper would require one lucifer and the work of a moment, perhaps doused with the ink. Tony did not know if ink was particularly flammable, but, since so many things were, it was quite possible.

The engraved plates had to be somewhere in the house or the press would be useless. He fitted his pick into the lock and felt for the sliders, working one, and then another before feeling the pick slip. And now he must start over.

How many were there supposed to be? As many as eighteen, and any mistake meant a new beginning and more time wasted. He tried again, progressed slightly further and felt the pick slip in his sweaty hands.

Damn it. Damn it all to hell. He swore silently and repeatedly. Then he took a deep breath and began again.

It would have to work, because he would not return to Constance empty handed. He imagined her as she had been when she visited him. Huge, dark eyes, smooth skin, red lips, body soft and willing.

And he had sent her away. He must have been mad.

Of course, what was one night of gratitude against a lifetime of devotion, if there was some way she could be persuaded to see his intentions towards her ran deeper than the physical? In the end, she would think him no better than Barton, if he took advantage of her need. There would be time, later, if he could wait.

He felt his pick catch another slider and move it into position. And he focused on the touch of the lock and the vision in his mind of her leaning close to whisper softly in his ear.

There was a click of the room's door handle, which seemed as loud as a rifle shot in the dead silence of the house. Tony withdrew his pick and darted behind a curtain, praying that the velvet was not swaying to mark the passage of his body.

He could see the light at the edge of the curtain; the glow was faint, as though someone had entered the room, bearing a single candle.

A man, by the stride. Long, and with the click of a boot heel.

Barton.

Pace, pace, pace. Tony counted out enough steps for a man of nearly six foot to reach the desk.

He held his breath.

There was a faint rattle as a drawer was unlocked. The rustle of paper. A pause. A sigh. The sound of retreating footsteps, along with the retreating light. And the click of a door latch again.

Tony grinned to himself. Where best to keep a deed? In a safe? Hardly necessary, since no one would be seeking it. Best to keep it close, where one could admire it. Touch it when one wanted to reassure oneself of victory and fantasise over the conquered in the dark of night.

All in all, he was lucky that Barton was not keeping the document at his bedside. Perhaps with the prospect of Constance so firmly in his grasp, the deed was not necessary.

Tony stepped from behind the curtain and produced a penknife, then slid it along the space in the desk drawer until he heard a satisfying click. He opened the drawer and found the deed, face up in plain view.

Too easy, really, once one left common sense behind and entered the realm of obsession. He could almost feel sorry for Barton, had the man chosen a different object for his passion.

Tony folded the paper and tucked it into a pocket. He went to the window and was gone.

Chapter Nine

Music played softly in the background and Constance sipped her champagne and pretended to enjoy herself. Sunday night's ball at the townhouse of the Earl of Stanton was to have been a night of pure pleasure in the company of friends. She had been looking forward to it for weeks. And now Barton had ruined everything. The music made no impact and the drink held no flavour. All she could think about was the impending doom of Monday morning and the cold look on Tony's face as he had sent her away.

Her friend, the countess, had hugged her when she had seen the expression on Constance's face, and enquired after her health.

She had pretended that nothing was wrong, but even the earl had noticed the change in her and remarked on it. And Esme had clasped her hand again and assured her that, whatever the problem might be, she had but to ask, and they would find a way to resolve it. She could treat the Stanton home as her own, if need be. Stay the night or longer, if she wished. And take pleasure in the entertainment at hand, for it was expected to be most fine.

Constance had insisted that she was in no dire need, and that her friend needn't worry, although the earl's look at her as she passed through the receiving line was too shrewd and it was clear that he was not fooled.

It had been a mistake to lie at all. For it would look even worse to her hosts when she needed to swallow her pride and beg Esme for refuge at the end of the evening, if it was to be a choice between her house and her honour.

There was some comfort, at least, in knowing that only the best company was invited through these particular doors. She had no reason to fear a run in with Barton before the morning, for such as he would never gain entrance to a ball held by the Stantons.

Which made it all the more surprising to see Anthony Smythe in close conversation with the host. The earl could not possibly know the man's true occupation, or St John would throw him bodily from the room. And Constance could not very well inform them of what she knew. Certainly not when she had gone to Mr Smythe, requesting the very service she pretended to abhor.

He was across the room from her, and she tried to resist the urge to look in his direction. How utterly mortifying it had been to go to him, practically bare and obviously willing, only to be patted on the head and put from the room. If she had behaved in a similar manner, with any of the other men of her acquaintance…

Then she need not have gone to Mr Smythe at all. Upon seeing how she had costumed herself, and hearing of her willingness to co-operate, they'd have given her any sum she required to clear her debts. The ink would scarcely be dry on the cheque before they'd have taken her up on her offer.

Then why, for the sake of her already-battered spirit, had she gone to the only man unwilling to take her body as payment? Was it because she had known in her heart that he would be too honourable to accept?

Or simply because she wanted a reason, any reason at all, to see him again, tempt him in a way that would make him forget her behaviour in the library, and offer him no resistance when he pulled her close, laid her down, and took from her what she wanted to give him?

It had been so easy to restrain herself through the last year, as the suggestions she'd received had become bolder and bolder. And, on some level, she'd known that if there was no one to offer her marriage, there might be one whose offer was not quite so insulting as the rest. She had no desire to be a mistress. That would be no better than marrying for money.

But if there were a man who valued her, and whose company she enjoyed, and if he was willing to be discreet? She would gladly yield just to feel arms around her again, and lips on her temple, and to sleep secure in the knowledge that someone cared about her, even if it was for only a night.

She glanced into a mirror at the far end of the room, catching a glimpse of the image of Tony Smythe reflected back to her. His dark blue coat fit smoothly over the muscles she felt when he'd held her. His legs, as well, were straight and strong from climbing, and graceful as he walked. She thought she could hear his distant laugh, and could imagine the light in his eyes, and the way his smile curved a little higher on one side than the other.

It was a face not so much beautiful as it was interesting. There was energy in it, and enthusiasm. One could look at it for a lifetime and always see something different. And when he had a passion for something, or someone, his excitement would be impossible to resist.

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